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TROUBLE IS A TEXAN

ONE GLANCE AT THE STRANGER AND
MATT BREEN KNEW WHAT WAS
GOING TO HAPPEN...BY
S. OMAR BARKER

THREE GUNMEN ONE GIRL

THE KID WAS HOT-HEADED, DANCIGER, VERY
DANGEROUS, BUT BEFORE THEY RODE OVER
THE ARIZONA BORDER, FRANK BOLDS FIGURED
THAT THE WOMAN THEY ALL WANTED WOULD
BE WORRYING HIM THE MOST...
LUSTY THRILLER BY
W. J. REYNOLDS



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VETS

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Vol. 3
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May
1956
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★ ★ BRAND NEW ACTION-PACKED THRILLERS ★ ★

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copyright 1940, Manvis Pub., Inc.

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TROUBLE IS A TEXAN

THE KID came out of the mesquite scrub afoot, his back bent under the weight of a saddle toted upside down on one shoulder. From where he sat on his bedroll mending a latigo, Matt Breen could see tiredness in the fellow's gangling gait as he came up the slight rise toward camp.

Old Tuck Fargus looked up from fanning his cook fire.

"Who the devil?" he grunted at Matt squinting smoke-watery crossed eyes as if he felt no enthusiasm for company.

The young XL trail boss didn't answer. He noted a certain swagger, as if in defiance of fatigue, in the approaching ranny's stride and glimpsed the coppery glint of Texas sun on short whiskers, then turned his attention back to his saddle-mending as if even less pleased than the cook with what they saw.

Yonder where bright green mesquite roomed out into a grass-velveted flat, the eight cowhands of Matt Breen's trail crew were leisurely circling a herd of twenty-six hundred longhorns, skillfully shaping up the grazing steers for their evening bed-down as soon as their lean, high bellies should be full of grass. On a low rise the horse wrangler sat side-hipped in his saddle, a highlighted statue in the slanting sunlight, quietly watching the XL remuda fan out to grass.

Ten days up the trail and all was well. No stampedes, no storms, no strays, no bogs, no buckaroo bickering in camp. A young captain com-

The XL herd pushed forward, its lead steers stepping out briskly, its long snake-body of high boned hips and gleaming horns lined out behind them.

Ten days of the trail and all was well for the XL crew — no stampedes, no storms, no renegades. And then, this night, this grinning, gangling kid comes swaggering in to their campfire . . .

manding his first ship could not have asked for smoother sailing. Barely twenty-two, Matt Breen felt pleased and proud of this first drive in his youthful charge, and glad of a chance to forget last year's unpleasant happenings back in Comal County.

"Howdy, Matt." The newcomer threw down his saddle. He was big in build but with a boyish lankness that tagged him no more than eighteen or nineteen.

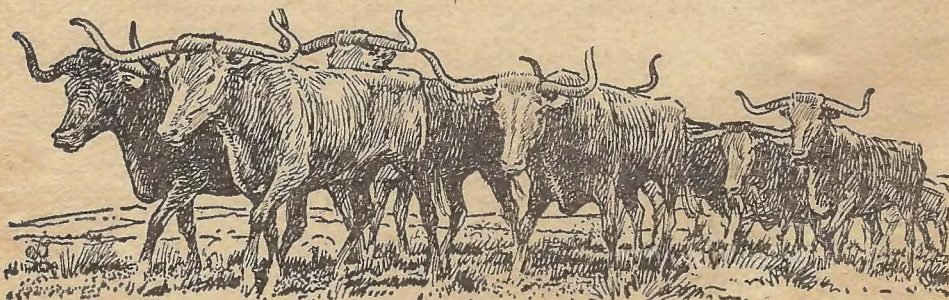
The trail boss nodded without looking up. The newcomer picked up Breen's recently emptied tin cup, filled it from the black coffee pot and came back to slouch down on the nearest bedroll, blowing on the scalding brew.

"You make yourself at home mighty easy, stranger!" Tuck sounded mildly hostile.

"Sorry, cookie!" The kid cracked a white-toothed grin at him. "I've been smellin' that good coffee for a mile."

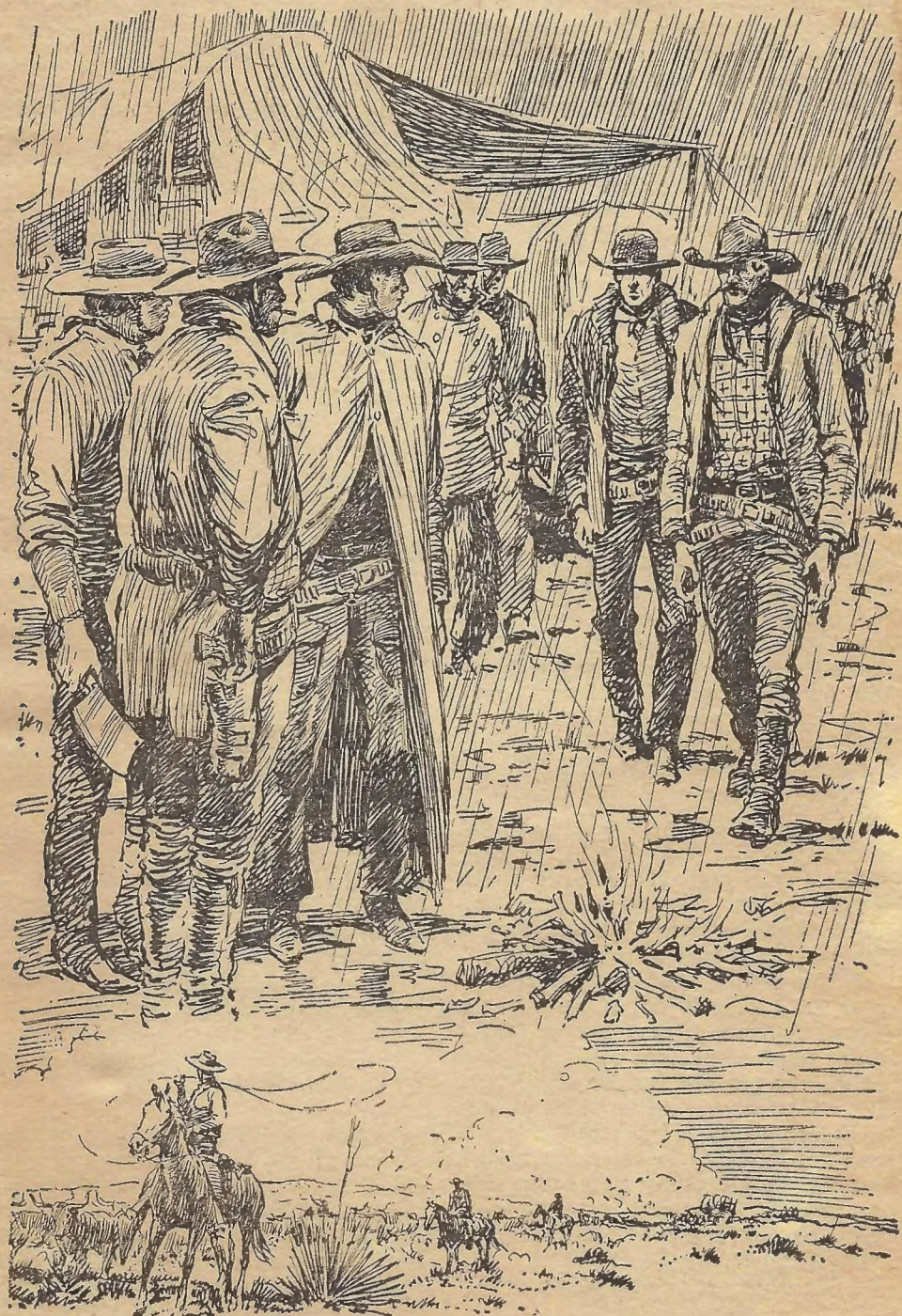
He took a throat-scalding gulp, and the shakiness of his hand left a brown dribble beaded on the fuzzy curls of his red beard.

"Well, Matt?" The grin was gone



**ONE GLANCE AT THE STRANGER AND MATT
BREEN KNEW WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN...
FEATURE-LENGTH THRILLER By S. OMAR BARKER**

The XL crew were circled around the fire when the bold-eyed, gun-hung man-hunters strode into camp.



now, the hazel-green eyes laced with an odd anxiety. "Don't you even know me with these whiskers?"

"Yes, I know you, Rusty." Breen raised straight-gazing brown eyes from his saddle mending. He spoke quietly, but the set of his rather long jaw was like gray granite. "I don't know how come you to be here, but it won't do. My job now is driving cattle."

"I'm afoot, Matt." The kid took time to gulp more coffee. "My horse played out on me. You're headed north—out of Texas—and you've got to take me with you!"

THERE WAS rawhide toughness in Matt Breen's voice now. "I don't aim to ask you no questions, but I see you've got a saddle. I'll give you a horse and enough chuck to get you back to the settlements. From then on—"

"Goshamighty, Matt—I ain't even got a gun! They'll—"

"You might be better off if you'd never had one," Breen broke in. "Now you listen to me. I've got a herd to deliver. So far, no trouble, nor I don't want any, neither with the law nor nobody else. If you're aiming to high-tail out of Texas, I reckon I can't stop you—but you'll sure as the devil have to run on your own track."

"But dadblame it, Matt, I—"

"We'll be fixin' to have supper as soon as the boys ride in. You can eat—then git!"

"You talk high and mighty for a cotton patch cowpoke, Matt. You think bossin' a trail herd makes you the king of Texas or something?"

Breen didn't answer that. It was true he had been raised in a south Texas "cotton patch," but so had a lot of other competent cowhands. Out yonder across the flat he could hear the cheerfully raucous voice of one of them now, raised in ribald song. It was too far away to catch the words, but Matt could easily guess that Brazos Bill Endicott was warbling once again the more or less lyrical lines of "The Life of the Cowboy":

"The life of the cowboy, it's care-free and gay!

He sweats for the fun of it, not for the pay!

Oh, never, no never don't doubt it!

The dear Texas cattle, he loves them so well,

He'd die for their sake and the boss'—like hell!

Rye whiskey—he can't do without it!"

Ol' Bazos Bill, up the trail a dozen times, sometimes clowning, sometimes hell in his neck, but always a cowhand to swim the river with...

Rusty stood up and started for the coffee pot, staggered a few steps, swayed dizzily and toppled over.

With the old cook's help Matt Breen dragged the fainted cowboy back to his own bedroll and propped him up against it. If Tuck Fargus had looked, he might have seen a deep distress in Breen's eyes, though the flat tone of his voice belied it.

"Now if this ain't one devil of a note!" he said.

"Drunk too fast on an empty gut," observed Tuck Fargus impersonally.

"I'll fetch some water," said Breen.

Rusty's head lolled loosely, his dusty black hat still on. His eyes rolled without sight or focus behind half closed lids. Tuck yanked off the hat, started to fan him with it, stopped abruptly to stare at short reddish hair obviously as newly grown as the fuzzy whiskers, then went on fanning.

"I see this boy's been where the mowin' machine cuts low," he remarked when Matt returned with a dipper of water. "Maybe we ought to slit his throat and throw him in a gully while it's still easy!"

The troubled look on Matt Breen's face failed to resist a faint grin.

"I purt near believe you'd do it, you ol' heathen!" he said and splashed water in Rusty's face.

THEIR REVIVED visitor was up and around, with his hat on, when six of the XL crew came loping in for supper, leaving two cowboys watching the herd. Seeing no strange horse around, some of the cowboys looked at him a little inquiringly, some nodded to him, but when Matt Breen offered no explanation of the newcomer's presence, they asked no questions.

Men usually didn't in the cow camps of that day and time.

When they were about through eating, Matt Breen addressed the visitor, his quiet voice louder than usual, as if to make sure the others heard him too.

"Mr. Smith," he said, "late as it is, you just as well stay the night. We'll ketch you a horse first thing in the morning. We stir early, so it won't delay you any to speak of."

"Why, thanks, Mr. Breen!" If there was a hint of mockery in Rusty's tone, his grin disowned any malice. "But I had it in mind to help you boys put this herd up the trail!"

"I'm already full-handed," said Matt Breen shortly. He turned to Brazos Bill. "We'll spare Mr. Smith that puddin'-foot paint in your string, Brazos. Not much cowhorse, but he'll do to travel on."

"The nice thing about ridin' a paint," observed Brazos Bill, hunching his bull-built, slightly humped-over shoulders in a sort of half clownish way he had, "if a man gits lost, folks can always remember what color horse he was on."

Midge Calley and a couple of others blew on their coffee and grinned a little, aware of the traditional distaste of wanted men for horses of distinctive coloration.

"Who you think you're giggin', cowboy?" Rusty flared up. "If you think—"

"Never mind what he thinks," broke in Matt Breen sharply. "And that'll be all out of you, Brazos!"

The XL cowhands looked surprised, wondering what sort of burr in his blanket would make their soft-spoken trail boss speak so sharply either to Brazos Bill, whom he was known to like and respect, or to a guest.

"Gettin' kinder wring-tailed, ain't you, Matt?" Brazos looked amiably unrebuked. "Smith, huh? I knowed a batch of Smiths over in Bandera County. Shingle shavers. Any of you fellers ever straddle a shavin' horse?"

"I straddled a barber pole out of town once," volunteered weather-wizened Link McGlone. "Except for the honor of it, I'd just as soon have walked!"

The joke was old, but cowboys laugh easy among their own kind. They laughed some more when Brazos Bill twanged an imaginary guitar to

accompany a new stanza of his favorite song:

"The life of the cowboy, it's care-free and gay!

He's split up the middle, but only half-way!

Oh never, no never don't doubt it!

He don't shave no shingles nor live in no town—

He's too busy keepin' that forked end down!

Rye whiskey—he cain't do without it!"

Brazos Bill's crack about riding a paint horse had sparked a threat to cowcamp peace, but his own quick shift to nonsense had smothered it. Matt Breen didn't need to thank him. These two understood each other too well.

Matt heard Rusty moan and whimper in his sleep several times during the night, but the big-boy-buckaroo rolled out for breakfast with his hat on, brisk and breezy.

"Which one of you bristle-whiskers snores soprano?" he inquired.

It was no more than a youngster's awkward attempt to "be one of the boys," but nobody grinned. Cowcamp breakfast, with dawn still only a faintly reddening promise in the east and the remuda jingling in, was not a good time for joshing by a stranger in camp.

LATER, RIDING out to the herd, Matt Breen turned in his saddle to watch Rusty jogging off southward on the paint horse.

"Mr. Smith wore out his welcome right quick, didn't he?" said Brazos Bill, batting pale blue eyes innocently. "I sorter hated to see you run the boy off, Matt."

Breen shot him a sharp look. "I've got my responsibilities," he said shortly, "but cuddling cuckleburs ain't one of them. That boy don't belong in my trail crew, Brazos. He belongs—"

"In the pen," Brazos Bill finished it for him. "I reckon you realize I know who the kid is, don't you, Matt?"

"Then I'll ask you to keep your mouth shut about it. I'd just as soon not have it discussed."

"You think he was guilty, Matt?"

"What I think," said Breen, "needn't concern nobody but me."

"Sure," shrugged Brazos Bill. "Quit wringin' your tail, Matt. You've got a herd to put up the trail—remember?"

The next day the XL herd pushed another fifteen mile swath of sun-baked Texas behind it, its stalwart lead steers stepping out brisk and willing, its long snake-body of high-boned hips and gleaming horns lined out behind them, and never a bobble from point to drag to mar a trail boss' pride in a perfect drive.

When boss and crew loped in from bed-grounding the herd that evening, there sat "Mr. Smith" on a clump of sacaton a good piece away from the wagon.

Matt Breen's lips tightened as he rode to him, alone.

"Rusty, what are you doin' here again?"

"Waitin' for a bodyguard!" Rusty's effort to grin was not unlike the ingratiating wag of a stray pup's tail. "Your cook offered to cut my throat if I come near the wagon!"

"Tuck might do it, too," said Matt Breen dryly. "Rusty, I know your time ain't up. How come you're out?"

"The pen ain't a nice place to spend ten years for something you didn't do, Matt. You remember Jim and Rupe Mercer from over on Cypress Creek?"

Matt nodded. He remembered the Mercer boys all right. They had not been members of the Comal County wild bunch that Rusty had taken up with, nor had they been accused of any part in the night-time shooting of Constable Tom Weatherford for which Rusty had been sent to the pen as an accomplice, but Matt knew the Mercers had shed no tears over the choleric constable's demise.

"Jim and Rupe have got guard jobs at the pen," Rusty went on. "They looked the other way—and I walked out. Have the Rangers ever caught Tip and Hank Gruber, Matt?"

"Not that I've heard of. I put in some time helping hunt 'em, but no luck."

"Listen, Matt, I've been on the dodge six weeks now, and I tell you it's hell bein' hungry and scared all the time. All I want is to get some

place where they ain't after me so I can take a fresh start. I wouldn't be the first maverick to go up the trail with a herd just to get out of Texas!"

Breen shook his head. "It won't do, Rusty. You won't never prove you're innocent by runnin' away. Besides—I hate to say it, but I'm drivin' clean cattle for honest owners, and I've got no right to get my crew mixed up in a manhunt. There's reward-hunters with their 'dead or alive' lists combin' the trail crews these days and I don't want none of that kind of trouble. I'd advise you to go back and serve out such time as you have to. You don't want to always be having to watch behind you."

"But dadblame it, Matt, I never had no hand in that killin'!"

"I wish we could prove the jury was wrong, Rusty," said Matt quietly. "But you know how it goes when a pup takes to runnin' with the wolves."

"All right then!" Rusty spoke with a youthful bitterness now. "Adios, Mister Trail Boss! Thanks for the horse—and the free advice!"

"Come get you some supper first," said Matt Breen shortly. "You can pull out as quick as you've et."

"Whyn't you make up your mind, boss?" grunted Tuck Fergus when Breen brought Rusty to the wagon. "Is this young yahoo boardin' here or ain't he?"

Matt didn't answer.

"Say!" grinned Brazos Bill. "Ain't you the same Mr. Smith I seen head-in' south on a paint horse this mornin'?"

"Cut it, Brazos!" said the trail boss sharply.

THE XL CREW and their "guest" ate supper in silence. It was a small thing, perhaps—a trail boss chousing off a stray in the morning, then feeding him again that night, and certainly none of their business. But they were of a tough-minded breed who admired firmness—and this wasn't it.

Brazos Bill was the first to toss his empty eating equipment in the wreck pan.

"Oh, the life of the cowboy," he began, "it's carefree and—"

"That'll do, Brazos!" Matt Breen cut him off short. "You and Midge are due on first guard."

"Keep your shirt on, Matt!" For once Brazos Bill didn't grin. "I reckon we know our turn!"

On their way out to the herd, Rusty overtook Midge and Brazos on the already tired paint.

"I've been wonderin'," he asked, "how long will it take this outfit to git out of Texas?"

"Keep on wonderin', sonny," shrugged Brazos. "You won't be with it nowhow."

Abruptly Rusty turned the paint horse southward, a lonely, shadowy figure in the deepening dusk.

"Bill," said Midge Calley soberly, "did you notice—that poor son-of-a-gun was cryin'!"

"I'll make him cry sure 'nough if he comes back pesterin' Matt any more! If there's anything I hate, it's a raw-edged trail boss."

"I'll bet that kid's on the skeedaddle," surmised Midge. "And I'll bet Matt knows it. I'll bet his name ain't Smith, either."

"That's three bets in one breath, Midge," Brazos shrugged again. "You got a plug on you? I'm fixin' to spit tobacco juice in the eye of the first steer that wiggles a horn tonight. We been too long without a run, Midge. It ain't longhorn natural."

For four more tranquil, sun-blest days the XL herd snaked on northward without mishap. Then low clouds thickened and it let in to drizzle. The wrangler helped Tuck stretch canvas over his wagonbows, and the cowboys ate supper in their slickers. The trail boss ate his in glum silence. It was a typical token of their regard for Matt Breen that nobody mentioned "Mr. Smith."

It rained off and on all the next day, but the rain had stopped when, at supertime, Rusty came riding into camp at a slobby lope, quickly unsaddled the heaving paint, slapped him loose, threw his saddle behind a bush and hurried to the wagon. Slickerless, wet and shivering, haggard and hollow-eyed, he also looked scared.

"They're after me, Matt!" he cried hoarsely. "Give me a gun!"

Breen set down his half-finished supper and stood up. For a moment he faced the cowboys circled around the fire, some close enough to it that their pants were steaming. Their eating stopped as they watched his face,

waiting in silence for his decision.

"Boys," Matt said finally in the quiet tone they had learned to respect, "I'll take it kindly if you'll all keep out of this." He turned to the shivering cowboy beside him. "You won't need no gun, Rusty. Go climb in the wagon!"

"Let me skin my own wolf, Matt! Give me a gun and I'll meet 'em off yonder a piece. Then you won't have to—"

"Climb in the wagon!" said Breen. "And keep your fool mouth shut!"

This time Rusty obeyed.

THE XL CREW and their boss were calmly eating again when the manhunters arrived. One held horses, two strode into the camp. They were bold-eyed, whiskery men, one of them wearing two sixshooters.

"Who's boss here?" It was not a mannerly inquiry.

Matt Breen stood up. "That's what I draw pay for," he said quietly. "We're just eatin' supper—if you gentlemen care to join us."

"Never mind the chuck!" The two-gun man's words sounded as bristly as his black mustache looked. "We're workin' on a list of wanted men. I'll look your crew over for fugitives."

"You're barking up the wrong tree, my friend," said Matt Breen dryly. "But here's my crew—except the nighthawk and two with the herd. Look and be hanged!"

"They ain't none of 'em him, Blackie," said the smaller manhunter. "Listen, boys, have any of you seen—"

"You heard the boss!" broke in little Midge Calley sharply. "He does the talking here."

"I'll take a look in your wagon, mister," said Two-Gun, and started toward it.

Matt Breen stepped in front of him. "That won't be necessary," he said quietly.

All of the cowboys were on their feet now, four of them with guns. Tuck Fargus picked up the hatchet he used as a meat cleaver.

"I might miss the little 'un," Brazos Bill hunched his big shoulders. "You boys center on him and I'll poke it to the big feller!"

"No use gittin' wringy about this, boys!" Two-Gun spread his hands and began backing away. "Let's go, Jess."

"Camp the night with us if you like," said Breen. "We've got plenty grub—in the wagon."

"You're mighty kind!" "Two-Gun sounded more than a little sarcastic as he continued to back away. "We're liable to visit you again, mister. Let us ketch you harborin' a fugitive and it'll go hard with you!"

"Don't scare us thataway!" called out Brazos Bill, but Matt Breen said nothing.

Once the reward-hunters were definitely gone, the XL crew returned to their unfinished suppers.

"Rusty!" This time Matt abandoned the "Mr. Smith" pretense. "You'd just as well come eat."

"You reckon they won't be back?"

"Not this evening," said Breen dryly.

Rusty climbed out of the wagon looking shamefaced.

"You sure stood hitched, Matt—you and all these boys. I never aimed to put you in a tight like that, but—"

"We won't talk about it," broke in Breen. "Crowd up to the fire and dry yourself out."

"Matt," said Brazos Bill after awhile, with that odd hunching of his shoulders, "it sounded to me like them buscadero boogers kinder threatened us, didn't they?"

"I noticed it," Breen nodded, not missing his meaning. "And I don't much cotton to such—not from reward-hunters. Rangers would have showed better manners—and more guts. I don't want to put any of you boys between a rock and a hard place, but if it's agreeable with all, I'm a notion to cut Rusty a mount in the morning. If not agreeable, you're free to speak up."

"Why not?" grinned Link McGlone. "Otherwise he'll wear that ol' paint out comin' and goin'!"

"One more rider on the drag won't hurt my feelin's," said Midge Calley.

"I'll let him rustle wood and scrub pots," grunted Tuck Fergus. "An' cut his throat if he don't behave!"

SO THE HERD rolled on northward with a stray pup in the crew and a worry on its boss' mind. Now the cowboys watched behind them as they rode. In camp they kept their ears cocked for sounds of approach-

ing riders. Their usual good-humored joking in camp slacked off in the presence of the stranger whose reasons for being here they may or may not have known or approved. Who rode or did not ride with this herd was Matt Breen's business, not theirs.

But something of the XL's former easy-going unity of fellowship was missing. Even Brazos Bill no longer sang fresh lyrical lines on the life of the cowboy, and there was an unwonted raw edge to Matt Breen's temper, maybe like a man on uneasy terms with his conscience.

Except for an occasional joke or bit of breezy talk, like a stray pup's tail wagging effort to prove that he belongs, Rusty's behavior around the wagon was mannerly and subdued. Riding the drag with Midge Calley and Pete Rodriguez, he tried to do his share, though his services were obviously not needed. Physically he was not in the way, but unlike the rest of them, Rusty was not here for the sole purpose of driving cattle, and it made a difference.

Then one morning the XL wagon "had a bronc for breakfast". Maybe Rusty had just got to feeling his oats—a symptom of the same restless, unripened spirit of teen-age spizz and bravado that had got him started running with the wild bunch back in Comal County. Whatever it was that prompted it, Rusty thumbed his early-morning mount into a bucking spree that over-ran the camp and tore up considerable jack before Brazos Bill caught the horse and stopped it.

Chuck wagon cooks were never noted for lenient temper, and Tuck Fergus was no exception. He came on the run with a neckyoke cocked back over his shoulder, looking wrathful enough to commit murder.

"Climb off that hoss, you young hellion!" he challenged. "An' I'll learn you some manners!"

The challenge struck fire. "Try it, you old coot!" Rusty flared back at him, stepping off the horse.

Brazos Bill put his big bulk between them. One hand caught Rusty by the front of his shirt. The other slapped his face—hard. "Ain't it about time you was growin' up, sonny?"

Instead of striking back, Rusty stood staring at the big cowboy, a

strange look in his eyes that was not fear nor wholly anger. In it was an almost childlike astonishment, respect and something of shame. Without a word he turned abruptly, caught his horse and loped off toward the herd.

"Tuck," Matt Breen spoke between tight-drawn lips, "I'm to blame for this. I've got no business allowin'—"

"Forget it, Matt!" broke in Brazos Bill with his sidelong grin. "Me and Tuck ain't mad at nobody, are we, Tuck?"

"The devil we ain't!" growled Tuck and began picking up scattered camp gear.

That noon Rusty stayed with the herd without his dinner. That evening, with threatening thunderheads making bag off westward, he rustled up a big stack of cowchips and dead bear grass and piled them under a scrap of wagon-sheet, handy for the cook's morning fire. Before the wreckpan was half full after supper, Rusty was hard at it, scrubbing up the dishes. These were a cowboy's peace offerings, and Tuck Fergus knew it, but the old cook would as soon have cut his own throat as make open acknowledgment of their acceptance.

THAT NIGHT, at the first flash of lightning, the herd stampeded in a torrent of thundering hoofs and clacking horns. In a brief flash of lightning, as he raced to outflank the fear-crazed leaders, Brazos Bill glimpsed a steepbanked gully ahead that looked too wide to jump. As he bent his own horse's course to miss the gully—and a probably broken neck—another rider lunged past him, crowding close to the running steers. In another flash of lightning Brazos saw horse and horseman take a wild leap across the arroyo as the first lead steer tumbled headlong into it.

"Lord save idiots and monkey's children!" he breathed, as he recognized the reckless rider.

By the time Brazos Bill could detour the arroyo, this wing of the stampede was already crossing it on the bodies of a dozen or more steers piled up in it. But out on the flat beyond, Rusty already had the point steers of the run turned and beginning to mill.

By mid-morning the next day the

XL herd, minus those few dead steers in the arroyo, was rolling north again under a blue, bright sky. With no trouble in sight, Brazos Bill joined the trail boss up on point.

"Matt, the kid done good on the stompede last night," he said. "He might do to keep, yet."

"I'm between a rock and a hard place, Brazos," said Breen worriedly. "Rusty claims he had quit the bunch that night ten minutes before Weatherford was shot, but the jury never believed him. In one way I want him to go back and give himself up in hopes he can sometime clear his name. Another way—hang it, Matt, supposin' I *do* make him head back and he runs into reward-hunters like them three that come to camp the other evening? The kid's awful like to get excited, and—"

"Them buscadero sons would just as soon take him in dead as alive," broke in Brazos with a shrug. "I know blame well what I'd do, Matt—I'd help him git away. But it ain't for me to decide."

The young trail boss turned in his saddle for a long searching look back beyond the herd, then his troubled eyes turned northward again.

"You reckon we'll have to swim the Red, Brazos?"

"It's been swum before," shrugged Brazos Bill.

They came to the Red River on a warm mid-afternoon to find the crossing booming from bank to bank with sullen, roily, red-muddy water.

"Take a good look, boys," advised Link McGlone. "That's the sweet stuff cowboys drown in."

Brazos Bill watched Rusty taking his first look at a flooded crossing and didn't find it hard to guess that it scared him. Brazos jerked his chin toward the ugly logs bobbling along in the swirling current.

"Red River alligators, sonny," he grinned. "They've made a heap of cowboys wish they'd stayed in Texas!"

"We'll swim it, boys," said Matt shortly. He gave Rusty a hard, straight look. "We won't need you, Rusty, if you've got other plans."

Rusty turned his mount away without answering.

"Let's make ready, boys," said Matt, "before it gits late on us!"

With cottonwood float-logs lashed to both sides, they crossed the chuck-wagon without trouble, then the remuda, and presently shouting cow-boys were crowding the herd's lead steers into the swirling water.

NOSES HIGH, horns tilted back, the longhorns struck out, swimming strong. Close alongside of the leaders, sometimes a little ahead of them, rode Matt Breen and Brazos Bill on their best swimming horses, pointing the cattle's course toward the "go-in-out-place" on the far side.

Some of the cowboys had left on part of their clothes, some only a shirt, but Brazos Bill rode naked. Back on the south bank where cowboys crowded an ever-widening wedge of the herd into the water, another bare body gleamed white in the sun.

The lead steers hit the "go-in-out-place" dead center and started clambering out up the muddy bank. So far it looked easy. Then, back in mid-stream a huge "alligator" wallowed broadside into the swimming column and the steers started milling.

Matt Breen was hurrying back there to help break up the mill when a swirling log knocked him and his horse both under. Somebody yelled. From the upstream side Brazos Bill tried desperately to break through the cattle toward where the trail boss had gone under. Back on the south bank two cowboys, one of them naked, plunged their horses into the stream.

Breen's black horse came up swimming for the north bank—but without his rider. A dozen yards down stream Matt's head and shoulders bobbed up, one arm reaching in vain for a hold on passing driftwood.

Already out in midstream, Rusty let out a yell that was somehow like a child's cry of anguish. He dived off his horse and struck out at a downstream slant with long, swift strokes. By the time Brazos could get there, Rusty had somehow got Matt's head above water. But he was fighting a losing battle against the current.

"Grab my horse's tail, Rusty!" Loud as he had to shout above the flood's dull roar, Brazos kept his voice from

sounding excited.

He felt his horse's rump lurch downward as Rusty's reach caught and held. The weight of towing two men pulled the stout pony under twice before they made it to the north side and clambered out on the muddy bank.

As Brazos Bill started to work to "pump him out," Matt Breen coughed, gurgled, spat out a generous sample of the Red River and spoke in almost his usual quiet tone:

"I ain't drowned, boys. Just let me lay a minute. Go help with the herd."

"They're stringin' across all right again," Brazos assured him. "Matt, I believe this kid'll do to keep!" He hunched his big shoulders and his amiable grin as he turned to Rusty was not unlike a handshake.

"Come on, catfish," he said, "let's get this water-logged trail boss up on the grass where he'll drain!"

Rusty opened his mouth, but the words wouldn't come.

MUDDY AND dripping but without a man, horse or steer lost in the crossing, the XL herd moved on to make camp a mile or so north of the river. For whatever it was worth, Rusty was out of Texas. But Brazos Bill had something on his mind.

With a spade and a small board that Tuck Fargus had donated from the chuckbox, he swam a fresh horse back across the Red. Whatever Matt Breen might think of it, Brazos had set himself a job to do, and because he had spied a rider in the southward distance, he worked fast.

He had barely finished mounding up dirt and stones to look like a grave and was sticking a crude headboard up at one end of it when the rider he had seen approaching rode up. Brazos recognized him as a Texas Ranger named Nick Stolworthy.

"Howdy, Nick." The sorrowful look on Brazos Bill's big face matched the soberness of his voice.

"Howdy, Brazos." Ranger Stolworthy had seen graves of drowned cowboys before, and he was a respectful man. He dismounted, took off his hat and stood reading the inscription lettered in charcoal on the marker.

"Too bad, Brazos," he said soberly. "I had good news for the kid. They caught Tip and Hank Gruber over west of the Pecos. They both con-

fessed their part in that killin' and gave testimony that leaves Rusty out of it. I've rode hard to find him and bring him word that—"

Neither Brazos nor the Ranger had noticed the cowboy who came swimming his horse across Red River from the north bank until now here he was, riding up on them fully clothed, but wet and dripping.

"Hello, Nick," said Rusty in a tone that somehow reminded Brazos Bill of Matt Breen's quiet, sure way of talking. "I was startin' back anyway, but I'm glad you're here to take me. Funny, ain't it?" He turned to Brazos Bill. "As long as I was still in Texas, it seemed like runnin' away would take care of it, but once I'd crossed the crick I knew Matt was right. I've got to stay in Texas if I'm ever goin' to prove—"

"Rusty," broke in Stolworthy with an unofficial-looking smile, "all you got to prove now is that you didn't get drowned swimmin' the Red—and maybe settle up with the judge a little for breakin' jail. We've caught the Grubers and their testimony clears you. As for you and your fake grave, Brazos—"

"Hell, Nick, you can't blame a man

for tryin'!" Brazos Bill hunched up his big shoulders with a grin. "Jury or no jury, I know when a cowboy will do to keep! I also know how you danged Rangers don't always stop at the line, so I just figgered I'd put up a sign to stop you—or any other man-hunters that might come along."

He broke off as Rusty looked up from reading the grave marker. Rusty stuck out his hand.

"Tell Matt I'm goin' back, Brazos," he said, "and start growin' up!"

Brazos Bill watched Rusty and the Ranger ride away, then picked up the marker he had made for an empty grave and looked at it:

LEONARD RUSTY BREEN

JUNE 8, 1872

A TEXAS WILDY BUT
HE HAD A GOOD BROTHER

He found the piece of old campfire charcoal he had used, soberly crossed out the third line, and got on his horse. In midstream, as his pony swam back across the Red toward the XI camp and its young trail boss, Brazos Bill dropped the board in the water and watched it float away.

"Oh, the life of the cowboy, it's carefree and gay..." ● ENI

THE SAVAGES by W. K. PUTNEY All some Western historians saw was the war paint.....

Many people have an idea that the American Indian was a sort of vagabond completely without any admirable qualities. Some seventy-five years ago a study was made of the virtues of Indians. Here is that study:

1. The Indian made it a point to live up to a standard of excellence that was very high. He did his best in warfare or peaceful occupations.

2. The American Indian was not profane. He considered it a grave and disgraceful offense to take the name of Manitou in vain. His personal language, when he became provoked, was always very carefully chosen. Only after contact with the early and rough whites did the Indian give vent to explosions of profanity.

3. The Indian possessed self-control and a calm exterior to a remarkable degree. He was seldom rude or brusque. He was taught to bear hardships and discomforts without complaint, was never permitted by the tribal chief to bother his fellow Indians with his personal troubles.

4. Generosity was always a strong characteristic of the American Indian. This especially became evident when a stranger visited an Indian village. Every wigwam was open to the stranger. Food was always offered, and was plentiful. The stranger was treated as a brother, not with suspicion.

That old report also stated that practically every Indian problem of the early West could have been solved by the formula expounded from the Good Book: "Do unto others as ye would have them do unto you." ● END



THE OLD WEST'S FIRST ONE

by NOEL
M. LOOMIS

EARLY CALIFORNIA had plenty of ambitious highwaymen, murderers, and thieves, but it took a young man from Alabama by the name of Tom Bell, who at eighteen years of age claimed to be a doctor of medicine, to pioneer the Old West's most famous kind of crime.

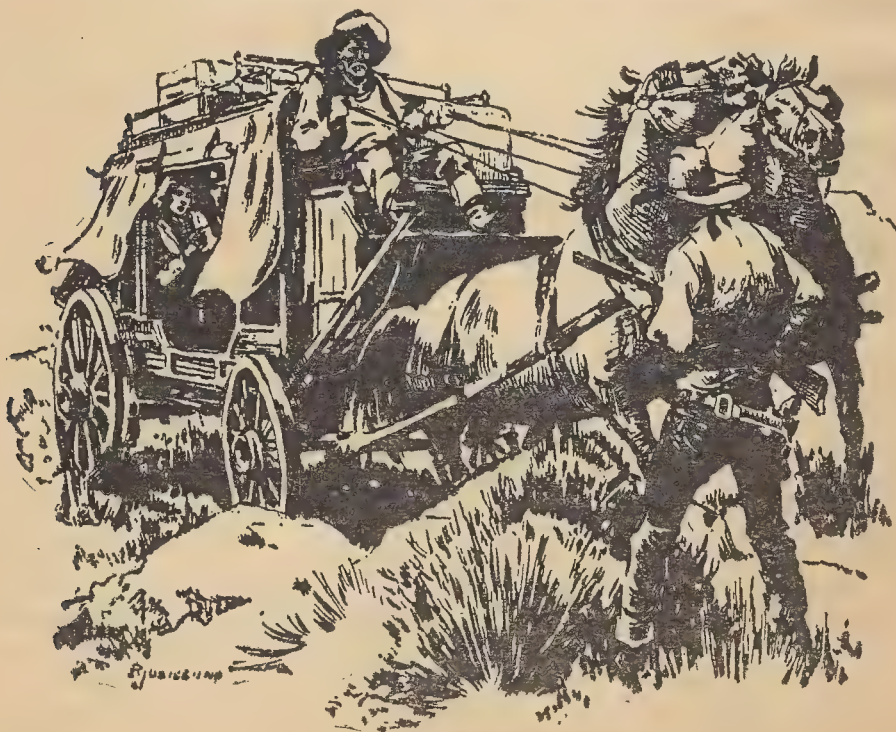
Up to his time, for some obscure reason, stagecoaches had gone unmo-lested, though for almost ten years they had been carrying heavy treasures in gold and silver. The great bandit chieftains—Joaquin Murieta, Manuel Garcia, Claudio, Pedro Gonzales, Valenzuela, Tomas Carrillo, Salomon Pico, Johnson, Jim Irvin, Crooked-Nose Smith—all had come, robbed and murdered, and most of them been hanged, but none had ever thought of holding up a stagecoach.

Bell's claim to fame was the holdup of the stagecoach.

Owlhooters helled up and down the cattle trails, killing, rustling, robbing banks, but it never occurred to any of them to hold up a stagecoach . . .

It was a fine opportunity for an enterprising brigand.

If anything can be said in Tom Bell's defense, it is doubtful even so that he measures up to H. H. Bancroft's description: "The most intelligent, accomplished, and kind-hearted gentleman who ever took the road in California." In comparison with Murieta and Tiburcio Vasquez, Bell probably wasn't a bad egg; but judged



by the standards we put forth today as civilized, he was something considerably less than a desirable citizen.

Many conflicting stories were told about him: he was big and ferocious and bloodthirsty; he was small and shy and inoffensive. As it turned out, there were two actual Tom Bells, both engaged in crime, and many others who used the name also.

(There was also a third Thomas Bell, a Scotsman who became a sterling citizen, but he had no connection with the man from Alabama.)

Early authorities say he was from Alabama or Virginia. A later authority says he was "Dr. Thomas J. Hodges of Rome, Tennessee—a little young for a physician but otherwise on the up-and-up." He did in any case join the Tennessee Volunteers, to go to Mexico in 1846, as a medical practitioner. This man was described as over six feet tall and broadshouldered but spare. He learned to handle a rifle and bayonet with considerable facility.

Somewhere he picked up a distorted nose—broken at the bridge back to his face. When the war was over, he went on to California. He probably tried mining and gambling—at least he said he did—but if he practiced medicine there was no state board by which to check on this.

Eventually he committed grand larceny and found himself introduced to the sheriff. When asked his name, he chose that of a small-time criminal about whom he had heard around the mines, Tom Bell.

He was sent to Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, but soon began to ail. There was no doctor on Angel Island, as far as the warden knew, and the warden did not want his prisoners dying, so Tom Bell was sent to the county jail in San Francisco.

TOM WAS working up to an escape. This was effected, though exactly how is not sure. One story is that a big contractor, furnishing food for the state's jails, was eager to start an investigation of the prison system and thereby worm out of his contract, and so arranged the jail delivery, complete with blank cartridges and every opportunity for the

guests of the jail to make tracks toward somewhere else—which they did. One of the escaped men was named Bill Gristy, who was up for ten years for horse-theft, and he became Tom Bell's *caporal*.

In case you do not lean toward melodrama, you may assume that Tom Bell, simulating illness and given "the privilege of exercise with extended liberties," merely walked out when nobody was looking. At any rate, he rejected the hospitality of the State of California.

Tom Bell and Bill Gristy invited Ned Connor and Jim Smith, who had also just escaped from behind bars (which makes the wholesale jail delivery sound like the truth), to join them in crime, and Tom accepted Monte Jack, who was considered a horse thief of some accomplishment. Monte Jack brought Juan Fernandez, and they, under Tom Bell's direction, split up and began to work the country north from Auburn.

They robbed travelers, stores, and saloons, and stole cattle and horses—and the gimmick was that no matter who did a job or where, he informed the victim that he was Tom Bell. This was one of the reasons Tom Bell had so many different descriptions. It also made it difficult for the officers of the law. They could be camping on the trail of Tom Bell and they would hear that Bell had been somewhere else. They would head that way, and then hear that Bell was still another place.

One of the persistent stories about Bell is that of the traveler he wounded in the leg. This one was said to be carrying a large sum of money on horseback. Bell and two other outlaws charged him and commanded him to stop. The man threw his horse into a startled gallop instead, but Bell shot him in the leg. They took his money, but Bell, still the doctor at heart, must have remembered the Hippocratic oath, for he did not leave the man to bleed to death—nor did he relieve his suffering with a knife.

A large artery was severed, so Bell skillfully bound it up. Then a wagon came along the road, and one of Tom's men stopped the teamster and took his money. They put the wounded

man in the bed of the wagon, and Tom Bell admonished the teamster to drive slowly and avoid the ruts. The wounded man also wanted his horse tied to the tailgate of the wagon, but this was too much. Bell took off the saddle and bridle and turned the horse loose...

By now the official picture was forming, and Bell could be identified. He had the broken nose; he was tall, thin, and broad-shouldered; he had a long sandy moustache and goatee; his hair was thick and light and hung to his shoulders. He was strong, quick and nervous.

And he was not too fussy about whom he robbed. He held up a vegetable peddler near Rabbit Creek, and the next day he stopped Dutch John with a load of beer and assessed him \$30, leaving him a quarter to buy a drink.

The newspapers began to nag at the state officials about Tom Bell. He hadn't done anything dastardly yet but he was getting to be a nuisance. Then three of his men appeared at a toll bridge and announced that tolls were suspended for the moment. The toll-keeper got a rifle and started shooting. The men escaped but left a stolen horse.

BELL WAS traced to an unofficial headquarters at the Western Exchange Hotel on the road between Sacramento and Nevada City. Near this hotel was a good place to get robbed. The owner was red haired Mrs. Hood, who went by various other names. She had a bar in the hotel, and was suspected of watching the travelers' pocketbooks and tipping off Tom Bell.

There is some disagreement on whether her relationship with Bell was other than a business relationship—but not much.

There was also a place known as the Mountaineer House run by a man named Phillips. The trouble was that Bell was never around when the officers were.

In the middle of the summer public opinion mounted and Tom Bell's enthusiasm for robbery cooled. Then he dreamed up the stunt that was his only real claim to fame: the hold-up of a stagecoach.

He picked a good one for a starter: the Camptonville-Marysville stage. The time was August 11, 1856.

In the strongbox beneath the driver's seat was \$100,000 worth of gold dust, and beside the driver sat a shotgun messenger named Dobson. The Langton Express Company was responsible for the gold, and a man named Rideout, who owned part of the gold, was riding alongside on horseback.

Three men stopped Rideout; three others stopped the stage. Dobson raised his rifle and knocked one of the robbers from his horse. In a few seconds forty shots were exchanged, because several of the passengers were armed. A second Bell man was shot by Dobson, although he himself had been hit in the right arm. Rideout galloped ahead of the stage for Marysville, with the stage thundering after. When they got there, they counted the casualties. One passenger had been wounded in the forehead; another had been shot in both legs; a woman had been killed by a bullet in her head. The gold dust was intact.

Now it was murder, and the newspapers rose on their hind legs and howled. The Marysville police got up a posse. Two detectives from Sacramento were assigned full-time to get Tom Bell.

The posse ran down five of the gang in a tent; they killed one and captured three, but Bill Gristy got away.

Monte Jack was shot somewhere else, but got away. Three others were picked up in Yuba County. Five were taken in Marysville. But the *Sacramento Union* was a glutton for punishing horse thieves. It said, "Well done thus far!"

The sheriff of Placer County got onto Bell and killed Ned Connor, but Bell escaped. Gristy was caught and thrown in jail, and agreed to tell where Bell's camp was.

The posse waited five days, then caught Bell as so many outlaws are caught—with his guard down. When Bell quit dreaming, he was looking into two rifles and a double-barreled shotgun. It was a bad spot, and he surrendered. (please turn to page 48)

TRAPPED

by HARRIS G. ASHBURN

ABOVE THE heavy green curtains that were draped across the lower half of the windows fronting the Silver Queen Saloon, Zeb Carter looked out on Allen Street. It was a noisy, bustling thoroughfare, and at that moment fine alkali dust swirled in choking gray billows as a train of lumbering ore wagons went by, creaking and groaning under their heavy loads. Muleskinners cracked long bullwhips and shouted blazing curses at the sweating, straining mules.

Zeb Carter was looking over the dust-caked backs of the plodding animals to the entrance of the Wells Fargo Express office. Three men burst out of the door, and hurried down the street to the Canton Restaurant. Zeb glanced at the clock on the wall with its shiny brass pendulum keeping time with sharp rhythmic ticks. It was exactly twelve o'clock.

"Don't you get enough of this dump at night?"

The Silver Queen had a new artist tonight, a little girl from San Antone. That, at least, was how Amy was introduced to the saloon crowd

inquired Callahan, the huge, muscle-bound barkeeper, coming up behind the lean young man. "Seems like poundin' that music box from seven to three in the mornin' would give you a bellyful."

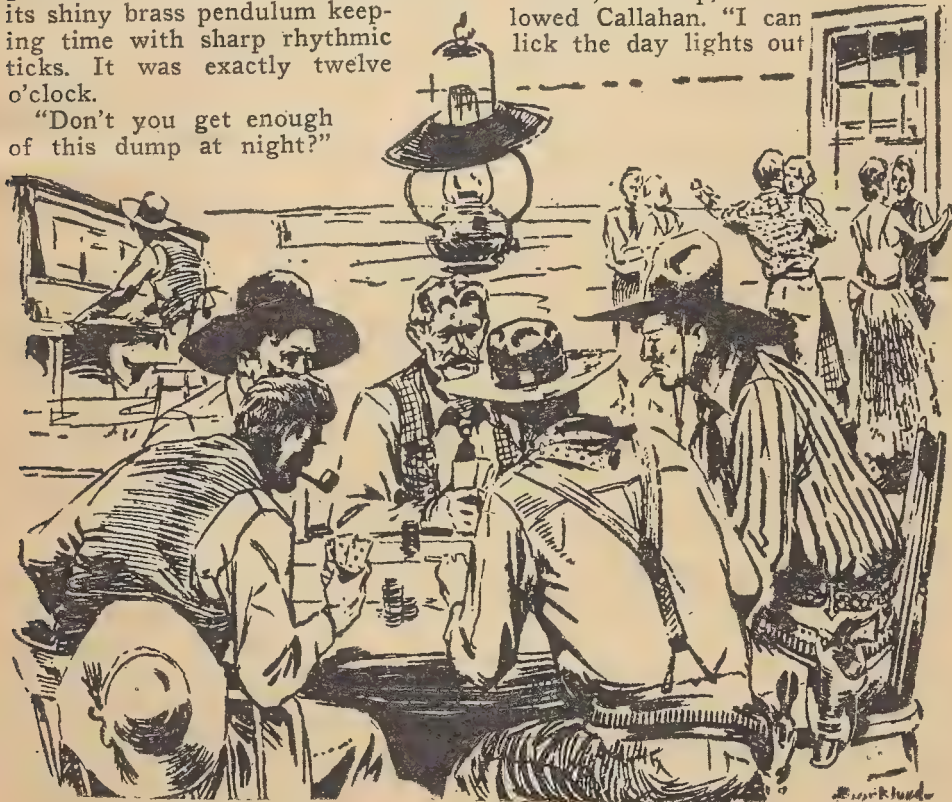
Zeb drew in a deep breath of the sour whiskey-tainted air.

"This is a heck of a town, Cal. Look at those mules out there. They work like the devil and what do they get? Curses and a belt across the rump if they don't move fast enough. You and me are just like 'em."

"I ain't no mule," argued the slow-thinking barkeeper.

"You're no better off."

"Look, shrimp," bel-lowed Callahan. "I can lick the day lights out



Three years ago Zeb had been a promising concert pianist, but now he pounded the keys at the Queen for a living.

any man my weight in Tombstone."

"Who's the gent that hires the singers in this place?"

Both Zeb and the belligerent Callahan whirled around and faced the forlorn-looking waif that had addressed them.

"He plays the piano," growled Callahan, sweeping his damp towel across the gleaming mahogany.

"They only use girls here," said Zeb, taking in the loose woolen shirt and tattered denims, the scuffed up boots with the toes turned up. Under a wide-brimmed hat that slopped unevenly around the pinched face, were a pair of large green eyes. Their haunted look reminded Zeb of a whipped puppy.

"What do you think I am?" demanded the scrawny urchin. The green eyes snapped to life and seemed to shoot out fiery sparks. "Just 'cause I ain't got a dress don't mean I ain't a girl."

"Don't mind him, sister," said Callahan. "He can't tell a man from a mule."

"Sit down at your piano, mister," said the girl. "I'll show you I can sing."

Zeb shrugged his bony shoulders and sighed.

"You know 'Kentucky Home'?" asked Callahan. "That's where I'm from—Kentucky."

"Sure I know it," replied the girl. "Can he play it?"

"Yeah—he plays everythin'."

Zeb led the way to the rear of the saloon and sat at the battered piano. He ran his fingers lightly over the ivories and turned to the girl. "What key?" he asked.

"Key?" A puzzled look crept over her face.

"Yeah—what's your range?"

"Never mind about my range, I'm gonna sing."

Zeb shrugged, annoyed with her ignorance. "Go ahead. I'll follow you."

THE GIRL began to sing. There was a deep, throaty appeal in her voice that went straight to the heart. It wasn't trained nor could it be called a great voice, but it was captivating and after a few notes she conjured up a vivid picture of the

famed old Kentucky home. When she finished, tears were streaming down Callahan's beefy cheeks.

"Gee, that was good, sister," said the bartender and he blew his nose with a reverberating blast.

"Well—do I get the job?" demanded the girl, looking squarely at Zeb.

"You can sing all right," he replied. He hedged for a moment, wondering how to tell her that her appearance would keep her from getting a job.

"Why do you want to work in this dump?" he asked.

"'Cause I can't find nothin' else," was her frank reply.

"It's tough. The girls here have to take plenty of guff."

"I gotta eat, mister." A haunted hungry look came into her eyes. "I can take care of myself. My name's Amy Kane."

Zeb looked up at the girl. "Related to—Tex Kane?" he asked, hesitating before he mentioned the outlaw's name.

"He was my father." She admitted this with lowered voice. "I suppose you heard Pa was killed in the Sandy Bob hold-up." She wasn't bitter. "Well, now you know why decent people won't give me a chance."

"Your mother?" asked Zeb.

"Dead. When we were run out of Texas."

Zeb fought against a rising pity. "Look, Amy, you'll have to talk to Benny Bradford. He owns this place." Zeb glanced at the clock on the wall, and rose from the stool. He walked slowly toward the front window and leaned against the bar. The girl followed him.

"When will he be in?" she asked.

"Benny comes in about two" interrupted Callahan.

Zeb eyed the girl and frowned. "Had anything to eat today?"

She lowered her eyes and he noticed her long silken lashes. They were almost colorless and hardly visible when she was looking directly at him. "I ain't hungry."

"Better get some coffee while you're waiting." He slipped a dollar into the breast pocket of her loose-fitting shirt.

Amy looked up. Her eyes softened and there was a glimmer of gratitude.

"Thanks, mister," she mumbled huskily, and turned quickly away.

Zeb Carter's glance brushed across the front of the Express office. The three men came strolling slowly down Allen Street. They had lost the eager stride which characterized their exit an hour before. As they entered Wells Fargo he noticed the time. Exactly one o'clock. In a moment a short, slight man with sloping shoulders bounded out and walked rapidly up the street. It was Whitney, the book-keeper. Zeb watched him disappear into the restaurant. He yawned and stretched his long bony arms. "Guess I'll get some coffee myself."

"You get back so Benny can hear 'Kentucky Home'," ordered the bartender.

"Sure." Zeb strolled out of the saloon and walked slowly along the crowded street.

TOMBSTONE, the fabulous city where fortunes were made by turning a stone, or by a flip of a card. People were rushing in from all over the country. Zeb snorted to himself. He couldn't get enough money together to get out of the place.

He hated the town, its glaring sun, the oppressive heat, the riotous crowds. It had robbed him of everything.

Three years ago he had been a promising concert pianist. They had called him an artist. He had money to spend and a host of friends. Now he was nothing...

He thought bitterly of Blossom La Belle. That wasn't her real name. She was a pretty little thing from Brooklyn who was trying to make the grade in show business. Zeb had met her in a cheap music hall in New York. He fell madly in love with Blossom and did his utmost to help her realize her dreams.

He coached her, taught her how to get the most out of her voice, wrote songs for her. They toured the country working small towns and finally ended up on the West Coast. It didn't bother Zeb that they didn't make the big-time. He knew she lacked the personality to become a star. He was near her, and he was happy. But Blossom became discouraged.

While at the Birdcage Theater in Tombstone she took the easy way to wealth and security. She married a prosperous mine owner. Zeb was stunned.

As long as his money lasted he tried to drown his sorrow, but money went quickly in the booming mining town. He had to go to work or starve.

At first he tried the mines. It was back-breaking work and more than his frail body could take. Once again he turned to the piano.

He learned that the better bistros preferred to hire their musicians direct from Chicago or San Francisco. So he chose Benny Bradford's Silver Queen. He soon found out he couldn't have made a worse choice.

Bradford was a fine-looking man, tall, powerful and as cruel as a wolf. To work for him was to become his slave. He used people as long as it pleased him, then kicked them ruthlessly aside. No one ever quit. Benny had ways of making that unhealthy.

However, Zeb had taken all that his sensitive nature could stand. He was desperate and willing to take desperate chances. He looked up and saw that he had circled the block. Across the street was the building occupied by Wells Fargo.

In his mind he went over every object in the office. He could have put his hand on anything blindfolded. Satisfied, he returned to the Silver Queen.

BRADFORD was talking to Amy Kane as he entered the saloon.

"I need gals to bring in customers, not scare them away," said Bradford. "Besides, your old man was a stupid hoss-thief, and I don't want none of his kin clutterin' up the place."

"But I can sing. I need a job," argued the girl.

"Why don't you go down and see Dirty Gertie," sneered Bradford. "She's always lookin' for gals."

The girl sank to a chair, her face flushed, her expression twisted to bleak despair. Bradford chuckled to himself as he lit a cheroot. It seemed to give him a sadistic pleasure to hurt people.

"Maybe some of Gertie's riff-raff will go for you." With this parting insult Benny strode out to the street.

Amy Kane covered her face with thin fingers.

"I'm sorry, Amy," said Zeb softly.

"I'm used to rough talk," she replied weakly. "Pa was no angel—" her voice caught.

"There are other places in town," suggested Zeb.

"I've tried 'em all."

A bundle of ostrich feathers and swishing satin swept in from the side door.

"Where's Benny?" demanded a shrill imperious voice.

"Just went out the front door," said Zeb. He looked at Flora Williams. She held the dubious distinction of being Benny's girl.

"That two-timing skunk," muttered Flora under her breath. She turned to Zeb. "He sent that cheap hussy to Tucson to get some clothes. The stuff in Tombstone ain't good enough for her."

"Who do you mean?"

"Beatrice. The new dame. How I'd like to get my hands on her!" Flora was fuming, sparks flying from her hard blue eyes.

"That's going to make you short a singer tonight."

"Yeah—and if he thinks I'm goin' to double up on my numbers he's got another think comin'."

Zeb was thoughtful for a moment. Behind Flora's hard exterior she had a heart of gold. An idea came to him.

"Is he making a play for that doll?" he taunted.

"If he is he's due for a jolt. I got enough on Benny to send him to Yuma for life."

"Want to get even?"

"I'll get even—an' then some," snarled Flora.

"Look, Flora," said Zeb confidently, "Benny just ran this poor chick to the ground. She can sing good enough to get by. Fix her up so Benny won't know her, and put her on tonight. You'll get some relief and put one over on the boss at the same time."

Flora glanced at the forlorn-looking figure huddled at the adjoining table.

"Meet Amy Kane," introduced Zeb.

"Good gawd!" breathed Flora.

"What can I do with that?"

"With what you know about make-up," flattered Zeb, "the devil himself won't know her."

Flora was silent for a full minute.

Then she said, "I'll do it. I'll show the bum. Come on, Amy." She waved her hand flourishing the ostrich stole. "I'll make a Cinderella outta you or bust."

Flora led the awed girl to the dressing rooms behind the stage. Zeb sat down at the piano and ran his fingers mechanically over the keys. He began to whistle softly. Callahan sidled up and leaned over the piano.

"The boss ain't gonna like it, Zeb."

"Leave that to Flora. You and me will keep our traps shut."

"Yeah—I'm keepin' butta it. Yeah—"

A customer entered and Callahan went back to his place behind the bar.

As Zeb permitted his fingers to run over the keyboard he wondered if he had done the girl much of a favor. He knew the insults and vulgarities she would be exposed to at the Silver Queen. He shook his confused head. Why bother with her? He had problems of his own.

In his mind he went over his plans. But one thing was lacking. He needed someone he could trust to work with him. He walked to the front of the saloon and looked out into the street.

There were hundreds of daring men in Tombstone, but he had to be careful. He had to have someone like himself, someone the Earp brothers wouldn't suspect, whose disappearance for a few hours would go unnoticed. No one would miss him before seven o'clock in the evening. That was all the time he needed.

"Zeb, come here."

He whirled around and saw Flora beckon to him from the stage. He followed her to the dressing room.

The sight that met his eyes took his breath away. Amy had a figure that would fire envy in any woman and desire in every man. Her wobbly hat had concealed a mop of hair that glistened like burnished copper. Under Flora's expert application of rouge and mascara her pinched features took on the chiseled delicateness of a cameo. She was a beautiful girl.

"Well, what do you think?" asked Flora.

"What did you do with your wand, Fairy Godmother?"

"Don't talk in riddles," said Flora. "Say something."

"She makes me forget I ever saw a woman before," replied Zeb. "Wrap it up, I'll take it."

Amy smiled and turned to study herself in the mirror.

"Get goin', Romeo," said Flora. "She does my dirty work tonight. After that, you can have her."

THAT EVENING the Silver Queen was humming. Men stood two deep at the bar and every game was going full blast. Benny ambled through the big room, delight mirrored in his eyes. The clink of glasses and coins was the music he enjoyed. At the piano Zeb competed with the noise unsuccessfully on the worn piano.

Flora approached Benny after her first number and said: "I put on a new girl to take Beatrice's place while she's away."

"Fine," said Bradford, reaching a hand out to her.

"None of that now, dearie," gushed Flora backing away from him. Her painted lips were smiling but there was a calculating coldness in her hard blue eyes.

She mounted the stage and Zeb crescendoed a fanfare.

"Gentlemen," rang out Flora's piercing voice. "We have a new artist joining us tonight. A little girl from San Antone."

There was a cheer from every Texan in the room.

"I'm happy to introduce the Texan Nightingale—Rosie O'Rourke."

The applause that followed the announcement was hushed as Amy stepped out of the wings. Her short, fluffy costume covered just enough to make her shapely curves more alluring. She was nervous and moved awkwardly, but to those feasting their eyes upon her, she could do no wrong.

Zeb struck an introduction to "Kentucky Home" and grinned up at her. She returned the smile and started to sing her song.

Her voice came weakly at first as her gaze swept over the sea of gaping

faces below the stage. Then she turned to Zeb and seemed to find assurance in his warm smile. Ignoring the others she hit her stride singing directly to him.

As she finished, Zeb cut into the applause and went into her second number. Amy was confident now and sang to each upturned face. Her voice was easy, vibrant, and there was a personal quality in it that shot straight to each listener's heart:

"My mother called me to her death-bed side,

These words she said to me—

If you don' mend your rovin' ways,

They'll put you in the peniten- tiary,

They'll put you in the peniten- tiary..."

The low murmur of voices, the clink of glasses at the bar, the sounds at the gambling tables, all were stilled. Smiling faces sobered and the eyes of many were moist as she finished her song.

The applause was not great, but a barrage of silver and gold showered about Amy's feet. Then a strange thing happened.

At the bar, men walked away from their drinks. The gamblers put aside their cards and chips. Jovial men became pensive. The thoughts of each person seemed to be reflective, as if all his misdeeds were suddenly laid bare before him. Strong men glanced nervously about, wondering if other eyes had seen their innermost secrets. Slowly, and in small groups, they drifted out through the doors.

Benny began to fume. "Where's that wench?" he hissed at Zeb. "Get her outta here!"

ZEB SHOT past the swamper who was scooping the coins on the stage into his apron. He dashed through the big store room behind the stage to where the dressing rooms huddled against the wall.

"Get Amy outta here," he gasped at Flora. "Benny's fit to be tied."

"What's the matter? She did good."

"I know, I know—but get her out."

Further conversation was unneces-

sary as Benny stomped angrily toward them, puffing on his long cigar. Callahan followed at his heels.

"Where'd you get that wench?" the owner barked at Flora.

"She did her job. What are you kickin' about?" snapped Flora. Uncertain fright clouded her hard, blue eyes.

"Go out and see what she did to the joint," growled the irate saloonkeeper biting on the cigar.

"Wait, Benny," said Zeb. "They all liked her. I'll get her to do different numbers. She'll be all right."

"Shut up, you skinny nincompoop!"

At that moment Amy stepped out of the dressing room. She had removed her costume and was clad in her sloppy shirt and faded denims. She was no longer the glamorous entertainer, just plain Amy Kane. There were still traces of make-up around her eyes.

"So that's it!" snarled Benny. "Tryin' to pull the wool over my eyes." He turned on Zeb. "I'll show you, you punk."

Benny swung and his fist caught Zeb on the side of his head. Zeb sprawled against a whiskey barrel.

"Pick him up, Cal," ordered Benny. "I'm gonna teach him a lesson he'll never forget." The saloonkeeper threw his lighted cigar aside.

Zeb was hoisted to his feet by the big bartender. His head was throbbing. Benny's fist jarred him again and again. The two girls were screaming. Blood was pouring from his nose and lacerated face. He tried to free his arms which were clamped to his sides by Callahan. The bartender had the strength of an ox.

Zeb ground his heel into Callahan's shin and the vise-like grip opened. Now his arms were free. From behind a looping right smashed against his temple. The lanky pianist was slammed into the whiskey barrel and felt it give as he blacked out.

Zeb awoke and tried to open his eyes. His head felt as if someone was inside pounding away with a sledge hammer. He managed to open one eye enough to see Amy bending over him. She was wiping away the blood with a cool, damp cloth. Every muscle in his body ached.

"Those beasts!" she muttered. "They had no right to beat you. It's all my fault."

"Forget it—Benny doesn't need much coaxing for this sort of thing," said Zeb thickly. It was hard to speak through his swollen lips.

"Where do you live?" she asked. "I'll help you."

"Upstairs over the saloon."

"Wish I had some whiskey to wash out these cuts on your face."

"I think I knocked over a barrel of the stuff when I went down." Zeb explained.

AMY GOT to her feet and looked around the dimly lit storeroom. Zeb rolled to one side and could see Benny's smouldering cheroot nearby. His stomach was weak and nauseous. The odor of the soggy cigar didn't help it any. He saw the girl approach with a heavy mallet. With two deft strokes she knocked the plug in the bung hole loose, allowing the liquor to seep out upon the floor. She picked up an empty flask and filled it.

"Let's get outta here before anyone finds all that spilled whiskey," she whispered. "Can you walk?"

"Maybe, if I can get on my feet," said Zeb. "There's a door in the back."

They went out the rear door and, keeping in the shadows of the big building, arrived at another rear door, the entrance to "Haggerty's Rooming House." They ascended the long narrow flight of steps.

"Which one is yours?" asked Amy.

"Last door on the right," replied Zeb. "Here's the key."

A moment later Zeb was sprawled limply across his bed, and Amy was bathing his lacerated face with the stinging liquor.

"I know it hurts," she said, "but this will make it heal faster." Zeb Carter gritted his teeth to keep from crying out.

Presently a sudden jarring explosion shook the building.

"What was that?" shouted Zeb, rising up on his elbow.

"They're probably blastin' at the mines," said Amy.

Zeb settled back on his pillow and closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Zeb," said Amy after a

pause. "I bring bad luck to everybody."

"Don't talk like that," mumbled Zeb. "You'll make out all right."

"I've tried everything I can think of—the only thing that's left is—the honkatonks."

"You want that kind of a life?"

"Of course not—but when you've gone hungry long enough you get so you don't care much."

The thought of her being dragged to disgrace was revolting to him. There was a tenderness underneath her brusque shell that tugged at his emotions. Somehow, he thought, he had to help her. An idea flashed through his mind. He was looking for a partner—why not use Amy? Zeb jerked himself up so suddenly she jumped. "I've got it," he shouted.

"Got what?"

"You've got nerve, Amy—I got a plan that will make us both rich."

"Yeah," she said skeptically.

"It's simple—I've been planning it for a long time."

"Go ahead—I'm listening."

"Across the street is the Wells Fargo office," he began, the excitement driving away some of his pain. "Tomorrow the Lucky Cuss mine payroll comes in. It arrives just before noon. From twelve to one there's only one man in the office—Whitney, the bookkeeper. I've been watching the place for months. All you have to do is to keep a look-out for me while I go in and get that payroll. It won't take me two minutes. Before anyone knows it's gone we can be halfway to Mexico. Are you game?"

Amy was sniffing the air. "I smell smoke."

"You can smell anything in this dump," he said hurriedly. "What do you say, Amy? It's our big chance."

"Listen! There's a fire around here some place."

"They burn trash in the alley at night. It's nothing."

"Zeb," she said slowly, a tortured look in her big, limpid eyes, "your idea is no good. I've seen too much of that. My father thought he could get rich that way, but it doesn't work. You'd always be scared, always be on the run, and sooner or later you would wind up with lead poisonin'."

"All we need is a start, Amy. Just this once and we'd quit. We'd be safe across the border."

"There's always one more time—I know."

"Say, you're right," said Zeb, startled. He could hear the crackle of flames and a wisp of smoke seeped in from under the door. He slid out of bed and raised the sash. Sheets of flames were shooting from the high windows of the storeroom below. "It's Benny's place—it's on fire!"

"Good," said Amy. "I hope he goes up with it."

"Sure, but we've got to get outta here. Come on."

THEY RUSHED to the hall. Black smoke was billowing toward them. Zeb started for the stairs. It was a mass of flames.

"We got to get out the back," shouted Zeb. "There's a window at the end of the hall."

He smashed the glass and looked down at the tongues of fire creeping up the tinder dry clapboards.

"We're hemmed in," cried Amy. "What can we do?"

"I've got a lariat in my room," panted Zeb. "Our only chance is to get to the roof. Maybe we can find a place to slide down."

Zeb rushed into his room and grabbed the rope. "Get a chair, Amy. I'll take this table. There's a trap door to the attic in the hall."

Zeb climbed to the attic and pulled Amy up after him. They felt their way along the joists until he bumped into the sloping roof. The acrid smoke-filled air burned his lungs. Tears were rolling down from his smarting eyes. He tore at the dry sun-warped shingles with renewed strength.

Soon a hole large enough for them to crawl through was opened. Outside they climbed to the ridge of the roof.

"Look, the flames are coming through the roof in front," gasped Amy.

They could hear the frenzied, incoherent chatter of the crowd in the street. A pitiful attempt was being made to fight the blaze by a bucket brigade. Zeb filled his lungs with a deep breath of fresh air.

"Work to the back, Amy. Maybe we can get down there."

Reaching the rear they found the building was ringed with flames. The adjoining building had caught fire now and was burning fiercely too.

Across the alley on the flat roof of a single-story adobe a Mexican was shouting, pointing to the two perched atop the burning building. No one paid any attention to him.

"Hey, amigo!" shouted Zeb, waving his rope.

"Si!" called back the Mexican.

Zeb made one end of the rope fast and cast the coiled line. The Mexican caught the loop and pulled it taut.

"You go first," he shouted to Amy. "Hang on tight."

She hooked her leg over the slanting line and slid to safety. The leaping flames were climbing higher every moment. When she was safe Zeb leaned out.

A hot blast of air slapped against his face. The building shook as part of the structure caved in behind him. He reached out as far as he could and swung clear of the flames, a scant three feet beneath him.

As he put his weight on the line he felt it slacken, then it was pulled taut again.

"Hurry, Zeb, hurry!" called Amy.

For a moment Zeb thought his battered muscles would give. He went hand over hand and each hold seemed to be the last. There was a thirty foot

drop to the hard packed alley below. Finally he succeeded in swinging his leg over the rope and let himself slide. The hemp ate into his raw palms.

His foot hit the edge of the adobe and Amy pulled him to safety. Zeb's strength gave out and he sagged to his knees.

"Thank heavens," whispered Amy, and drew him close.

He opened his eyes. The leaping flames from across the alley made flashing shadows dance upon her features.

"We're safe," she said softly. "I'm going to go before I bring you any more bad luck."

"No, Amy, you can't—"

"It's no use, Zeb. You've suffered enough on my account."

"From now on we travel together," said Zeb, clinging to her. "I should have thought of it before. We can have a great future."

"Not Wells Fargo—"

"No, Amy," he said. "You're an artist. You proved it tonight. I can help you. Together we can go a long way."

She moved close. Her soft warm lips covered his. Zeb drank in her sweetness as she gave herself completely to him.

Finally they both remembered the Mexican and showered gratitude on him for helping them.

"Santa Maria!" sighed the Mexican, grinning from ear to ear. "You are two very lucky people." ●END

DID YOU KNOW

● The famed markswoman, Annie Oakley, could perforate a tossed playing card a good dozen times before it hit the ground.

● President Theodore Roosevelt was once a rancher in North Dakota.

● Austin, the state capital of Texas, was originally named "Waterloo."

● The entire site of Oklahoma City was settled in a single day (in 1889, when the area was first opened to white settlers).

● The Royal Canadian Mounted Police have had two other official names. In 1904 they were known as the Northwest Mounted Police, then later as the Royal Northwest Mounted Police.

● "Wild Bill" Hickok was a Union

spy during the Civil War.

● There are over 70,000,000 horses in the world.

● Contrary to general belief, Sitting Bull did not participate in the "Battle of Little Big Horn," when his braves massacred Custer and all of the soldiers of his command. (He was back in camp at the time the battle was being waged.)

● The rifle got its name from the German word "riffelyn," a term used in describing the rifling of the gun barrel.

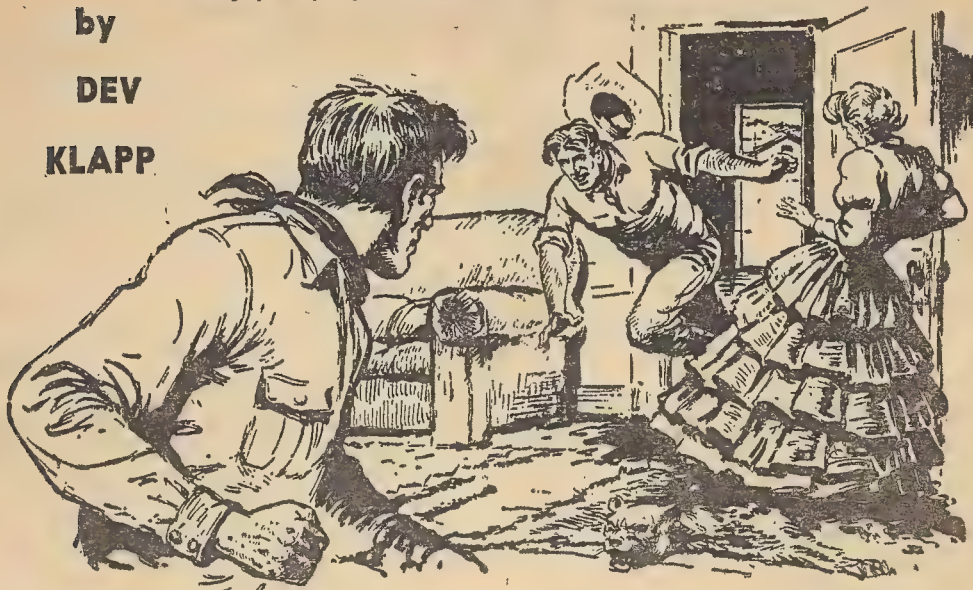
● The first rodeo, in which an admission fee was charged, was held at Prescott, Arizona, in 1888.

(Compiled by Joseph C. Stacey.)

BLOOD IN HIS EYE

Roughly, he plunged through the door into the dimness of a small living room.

by
DEV
KLAPP



THERE WAS angry purpose behind Slim Logan's blue eyes. His fresh-shaven jaw jutted with determination. He was on his way to get Cissy Jones told off.

Slim's brain seethed with indignation. Usually a good-natured, soft-spoken cowhand, he was in a fighting mood fit to tackle wildcats. His big hands were thrust deep in his levis, crushing Cissy's letter—which had aroused an extra-green jealousy under his calfskin vest when Snuffy, the wrangler, brought it to him high in the hills at the Triple X line cabin.

Yanking the ragged letter out into the open, Slim ran hot eyes down three paragraphs and fastened his glance on the offending fourth.

"What do you think," the paragraph began. "Bob Callon came home today. You remember me mentioning him when he went East to study. I know you'll like him, for he's a most fascinating man. He's asked me up to the house to supper tomorrow night. That's awfully nice of him, don't you think, considering Pop's only a cowhand on his pa's ranch?"

Slim snorted and crammed the wrinkled sheet back in its grimy envelope. He gave his paint a dig in the ribs that made the animal execute a

There was one gent in particular who'd make big Bob Callon look like a cowardly gal-stealing sneak. Slim had met up with him riding back from Kansas

startled leap. Lonely days and nights at the line camp had warped Cissy's written words in Slim's mind into enormous meaning.

Cissy wasn't nothing but a silly gal, Slim thought bitterly, and that big-talking rancher's son had bowled her over proper. Couldn't be otherwise. Well, he told himself grimly, the hombre would just take the next train back East after getting a good working over.

Sweating from anger and the long ride, Slim pushed through the big gate at the Twisted O, and headed for the little shack Cissy lived in with her pa.

He turned up a dusty path that led to Cissy's steps. A soft whicker made the angry cowpoke jerk his paint up short. He saw a small bay mare stand-

ing slope-hipped in the shade of a cottonwood that grew to the left of the little sun-warped porch.

Slim knew that mare. She belonged to old Colonel Callon. For a moment he hesitated, marshaling his thoughts. A perfect setup, he exulted to himself.

Slowly he dismounted. Then, standing beside his ground-hitched horse he rolled his right sleeve above the elbow, then the left. A smile of satisfaction flickered across his lips as he rippled the muscles along his arms.

"Slim!"

The shack's unpainted door slammed outward. A dark, slight girl cannon-balled across the rattly loose boards of the little porch and hurled herself against the cowboy's heaving chest.

"Pop and I were just wondering how long you were going to stay up at that old camp. Did you get my letter? Bob was just saying—"

"I got it all right!" the cowboy shouted. "*Where is that—*" Roughly he shook off the bewildered girl, stalked across the porch, and plunged through the door into the dimness of a small living room.

For a moment he blinked his eyes to get used to the lack of light. There on the right sat old Pop Jones, close to the fireplace. And a little to the left, Bob Callon was uncrossing long legs and shoving himself up from the old wicker rocker Slim remembered so well.

SLIM HAD to admit to himself grudgingly that the fellow had good looks. His yellow hair grew back from a high forehead, and his brown eyes looked smack-dab at you without sliding to one side.

Slim backed up against the wall and bunched his fingers into fists as Bob Callon started across the room, hand extended.

"Stay where you are!" Slim warned in a tight voice. He waved his fist menacingly. "First I'm going to tell you what kind of a sidewinder you are, and then, hombre, I'm going to black up your eyes like burnt biscuits."

Cissy fluttered through the doorway and made a timid gesture of dis-

treass. Pop wasn't the meddling sort, so he just sat by the fireplace and watched things develop.

"Slim—" Cissy began.

"Shut up, Cissy!" Slim snapped. "I'm going to be the one to talk for a change!"

Half-crouched, Slim stepped closer to the other man who stood legs spread in mid-room watching Slim's menacing advance with calm eyes.

"Listen, you!" Slim's voice quavered with rage. "I've fought coyotes, rattlesnakes, storms, stampedes, and trouble in general for five years jest to get a stake! And while I was doing this I told myself, 'This ain't going to last. Someday I'll have enough to marry up' with Cissy and settle down!"

Slim's chest rose and fell. His eyes glared into Bob Callon's and he wondered why the rancher's son didn't shift around and be ashamed.

Callon started to say something, but Slim interrupted. "I ain't finished talking yet, hombre. You listen."

Slim considered a moment then went on, "I ain't trying to go on a crying jag and feel sorry for myself, don't think that. Anybody man enough to take Cissy away from me fair and square I'll say 'you win' and bow out quick. But no gold-plated rancher's kid is going to play fast and loose with my gal and get away with it—not so long as I got two good fists and know how to use 'em!" He looked at Bob through half-closed lids. "Howcome you didn't stay at that there school back East?"

Cissy and Bob both opened their mouths to reply, but Slim didn't give them a chance. Like a pot boiling over, there was a lot of steam inside the cowpoke that had to get out.

"I'll take back one remark I made, hombre," he said quickly. "There's only one man I know good enough to take Cissy away from me. Know who he is, Cissy?"

The room was quiet with that quietness storms leave behind them. Slim looked at Bob Callon, hating the smile that had come to the man's face. Finally Cissy said in a small voice: "You mean the man you met on the trail?"

"That's the man," Slim agreed, in-

interrupting. He longed to plant a fist alongside Callon's grinning mouth. Usually he didn't care for fighting, but this battle promised to be a real pleasure.

He turned his head slightly toward the girl. "You never heard the all of it, Cissy. Maybe if I fill you in, you'll see what a lily this guy is alongside a real man."

SLIM'S LIPS tightened over his next words. "The guys I know ain't got fancy manners, but most of 'em will do to ride the river with." A light of reminiscence softened the baleful gleam in Slim's eyes. "This one ranny special that Cissy knows about, mister, would make you look like a cowardly gal-stealing sneak!"

He eyed the big man, puzzled that Callon showed no resentment, but just stood still in the middle of the room and listened. The guy must be a bigger yeller-belly than he'd figured.

"I met this hombre coming home from Kansas last year. And he sure come along at the right time for me. I'd just sold some cows and my sadlebags were full of greenbacks. Three owlhoots jumped me at a fork in the road. A whiskered guy had me backed up against a rock fixing to poke a knife under my ribs."

Slim paused for dramatic effect, then went on quickly before he could be interrupted, "I walled my eyes around when I heard a sound. And here come a feller sliding up in the moonlight. He pulled a six-gun and started fanning it, and them owlhoots begun to gin around. When the dust settled, whiskers lay at my feet and the stranger was clawing at what was left of his face. Whiskers' knife had done some mighty bad work there."

For a moment Slim forgot his audience. He relived that night. The wild ride to the nearest town. The stranger lying before him across the saddle.

Then Slim spoke softly. "I never did see the hombre again. I had to beat the snow back to Texas."

Snapping back to the present, Slim glared into Callon's brown eyes. "Do you wonder," he said angrily, "that after knowing such a man I couldn't stand the sight of the sort of fancy-

educated, gal-stealing ranny you are?"

"May I say something?" the blond man asked quickly.

"If you don't aim to beg off the beating you got coming, okay. But don't think all my gab has taken the idea out of my mind. A man stays in camp a month by hisself, well, he's got to talk. Go ahead. Get it over quick!"

"I also have been looking for someone," Bob Callon said simply. "Someone who took me to a doctor, with a hundred dollar bill pinned to my shirt. The medico told me about it when I regained consciousness next day. I would have died had it not been for this man. That's why I'm here, to say thanks at long last and pay back that hundred dollars. This is the first chance I've had to get down this way."

"You—you—were him?" Slim asked incredulously. "You don't look like him, and that ranny could really fan a gun. You're just a rancher's spoilt kid!"

"When the doctor finished with my face next day it was all right to use, but it'll never look the same."

Slim's fists unbunched slowly, but there was still a puzzled frown on his face as he searched the other man's features. "Yeah," he admitted slowly, "you could be him. It was only moonlight, and the light in this room ain't so good either. But you didn't fight like a school kid that night."

Bob Callon grinned and drew back his coat to show a gold U.S. Marshal's badge. "I went to school, sure. But it wasn't to a regular college as you think. I went to a lawman's school where they teach the latest methods in crime detection."

Bob stepped forward, his hand outstretched. Slim took it rather sheepishly and pumped it up and down. "I might of knowed," he admitted, "that a feller your size wasn't going to stand still and take the guff I dished out. And I would of, if I hadn't jumped plumb off the deep end."

A frown once more rode Slim's brow. "But say—er—Bob," he mused, "how come you happened along that night just at the right time?"

(please turn to page 33)

THREE GUNMEN, ONE GIRL

by W. J. REYNOLDS

FRANK BOLDS could see that he had made a mistake this time. Usually, these parties were desperate enough, but with escape on their minds, they seldom gave

him trouble. Later, he didn't care what happened to them. He guided them from Arizona, from an agreed point, into Sonora to a second point, and that was it. He collected his last payment and went home mindful of his scalp.

The kid was hot-headed, Danciger very dangerous, but before they rode over the Arizona border, Frank Bold's figured that the woman they all wanted would be worrying him the most

Marta jerked a thin dagger from her boot, but Frank hit her a backhanded solid swipe that sent her sprawling.



This time, he could see clearly, would be different. It wasn't only the woman, Marta Irby, he had taken a couple of females before, but there was an undercurrent here that Frank Bolds didn't like. Ken Irby was the woman's husband, but there was some kind of understanding between the other man and Marta Irby. Danciger and Marta obviously had a plot of their own.

Maybe Janet was right. And also, maybe it was too late to profit by her rightness.

Janet Lindecker had laid it on the line to Frank plain, without any frills: he either quit this outlaw-ferrying now and married her, or he quit seeing her. Period.

Once more wouldn't hurt, he'd argued, this would lift him out of the hole. Did she want to be a slattern, slaving on a greasy sack outfit? Next year he could hire a woman to help out around the place.

Her cards, Janet said, were laid out for him to see. She wanted a live husband, not a live memory.

Janet wasn't supposed to know about this last trip. Wasn't. She would now, with Sheriff Lindecker having been out at the ranch this morning, looking at those Mexican horses meant.

He'd told Frank, "I like you, Frank, and you've had tough luck with thieves and Apaches and renegades and this fight with the weather. Just happens though that Janet is my daughter and she's first with me." He rode off toward town, well aware that Frank would watch him and his dust for ten miles before Frank hit the brush with his charges.

What the sheriff told Janet would be tough for Frank Bolds.

Frank looked at the three people around the little fire in the draw that they'd built to make coffee to go with the meat and bread he'd brought. He didn't like any of it, or them. That woman Marta...

This was one of the times Janet had argued with him about. The time when his occupation, so to speak, had caught up with him.

Frank Bolds quit talking to himself and got up to go look at the horses farther up the draw. He avoided the

mesquite and cactus with practised ease. He removed the nosebags from the animals and checked the stake ropes.

Another graining tomorrow morning and one tomorrow night and the horses would have to root for grass. But they'd be a devil of a ways by then, barring Apaches, renegades and rurales. Barring a devil of a lot of things.

He went back to camp. The young man Irby was laying mesquite limbs on the fire, favoring his bad ankle. Frank kicked the fire apart and stamped on the embers.

"No more fire," he said. "Getting on to dark."

The young man sat back embarrassed and inexperienced. His was a clean face, not settled yet despite his twenty-one years. Easy living, but the kid would do in better company and with responsibility.

Frank sat down, chewing a stick, watching the others from under the tipped brim of his hat, his pale eyes alert, discontented. He liked this less and less.

MARTA IRBY was slender now but she would be a little more beefy later. But right now she was plenty poochy in the right places. Her skin was clear, not burned like it would be in this country soon, her eyes were blue and clear, her lips full and red. But the thing that really bothered Frank Bolds was the swivel way she moved, the far from innocent glances she gave Danciger.

Danciger was big and blond, a softness to his belly that came from a lot of soft living. But he was a dangerous man, a man smart enough to know that he needed help to make this trip. He had some frontier experience, Frank knew from his actions, but most of it in mining or cattle towns, he guessed.

Danciger had paid him two hundred and fifty in gold, but gold wasn't the deal they had pulled. That was hoarded carefully by Danciger, in a small satchel. Jewels most likely.

"Do you really think there's danger, Bolds?" Danciger asked. "Indians?"

"Some," Frank said. "Renegades and later the rurales."

"We'll have to depend on you for that, eh? To avoid them. Once there, we have friends, arrangements already made."

"If I don't get you there it won't cost you," Frank said.

"That's fair enough," Irby said.

"Don't be a fool, Ken," Marta said sharply.

"What'd I say wrong now?"

"If he don't get us there, junior," Danciger said, "you won't know if he charged us or not."

"We'll be too dead to worry," Marta said.

Danciger was watching Irby, a hard and merciless stare, then Danciger and Marta exchanged understanding glances that held its own message, a knowledge shared between them.

Irby missed that glance as he shifted his bad ankle. The kid was too trusting for the dark trails. He wouldn't last long.

Why should it worry him, Frank wondered, and the only answer he came up with was Irby himself. He was basically a nice kid, in the wrong company, in love. Love had ruined a lot of men with supposedly strong characters. It was Frank Bolds' opinion that when it came to a woman there was no such thing as a strong character. It just depended on how a man felt about her. You had it bad and hell, or heaven, was the limit, depending on how she felt about you.

In this case, Irby had had it.

"I hope Uncle Wayne got well," Irby said. His face was worried and hurt and defiant.

"Shut up," Danciger said.

"You didn't have to shoot him," Irby said. "He didn't have a gun even."

There was a sudden, mean squint to Danciger's eyes. "Irby, I've been listening to your bellyaching for three weeks now. I've had enough."

"Dan!" Marta said warningly. Her attitude said. "Not yet," plainly.

Irby was looking at them, glance darting back and forth. Funny, Frank thought, the things that'll wise a man up. Some he sees and some he don't, even plain things.

And then the shock was suddenly creeping into the kid's face, even as he fought it. He had been blinded

with love, and the flingy hips of his wife, and the soft words, but he was catching on now. He was seeing the understanding between his wife and another man, the way she was worrying for fear her man would go too far and fast. Her man, Danciger.

FRANK BOLDS was alert, his hand close to his gun. This wasn't good, in fact it was very bad, and Frank didn't want any part of it. Because the kid didn't have a chance. Marta and Danciger had strung Irby along, waiting to make their getaway before killing him. Dead men couldn't tell about hiding places.

"Don't mind our squabbles, Bolds," Danciger said mildly.

"I ain't your keepers," Frank said.

"All right."

Irby was watching but there was a slackness in him now, and his features weren't clear in the dusk closing in with desert suddenness.

It's the woman, Frank thought, it'll take him some time yet to get mad. Now he still can't believe it, he don't want to believe it. But he will.

"I've been cooped up all morning and in the saddle all afternoon," Marta said plaintively. "I'm stiff."

She's even an actress, Frank thought in disgust. A bad one.

"Would it be safe to stir about some?" Danciger asked.

"Don't strike a light," Frank said. "If the Apaches are close now, it won't make any difference."

Danciger and Marta got up and left the draw, and the faint murmur of their voices came as they walked up and down out there. Deciding if they should kill Irby now, Frank thought, and wondering what to do about me. They need me a day or so yet. But they've got the really necessary things, horses, supplies, pointed for the border. Chances have to be taken in their racket, and they could make it now...

Irby choked back a hurt sound, and he moved, shifting his bad ankle to cover it. The kid was having a hard time of it, he would be remembering a lot of things that had happened, things that should have tipped him. He would be the type to trust a woman completely, the type who

once betrayed, could do some hating too.

He was having the hard part now. He'd just lost his wife, but actually he'd lost her a long time ago if he'd ever had her. Those flingy hips had blinded him, and the soft words.

"I had it coming for being so stupid," Irby said. "I've been a fool, a blind fool!" Frank Bolds didn't say anything.

After awhile, Irby said, "They've been plotting this for months! Bolds, you're a tough feller, you know this kind of stuff, they aim to kill me, don't they?"

Yeah, you know, Bolds, you threw away a real woman to help this wench kill her husband and rob somebody of a sack of jewels. Yeah, you know all about it, Bolds, go ahead and tell the kid!"

"Yes," Frank said.

THE KID didn't say anything for some time, then, "I was an orphan, Uncle Wayne raised me. He was tight, but I didn't want for things I needed. He paid me a miserly salary when I went to work in his jewelry store, and no more when I got married last year. He didn't like Marta, said she was a tart.

"I don't have an excuse. I was weak. Marta was always after me for things I couldn't afford, she worked on me all the time, her and Danciger. In short, we burgled the store. Guess Uncle Wayne could see through me, because he caught us. He wasn't expecting Danciger, though, and wasn't armed. Danciger shot him without reason. I was too scared to think then, and ran off."

His voice was suddenly ragged. "Bolds, they had their own plan, I can see it now. They already had those arrangements made in Mexico, Danciger's connections. They were in a hurry to get clear and didn't want to show the trail, that's why they waited to kill me. That's why they waited."

"Why did they need you for the job?" Bolds asked.

"I knew the combination to the safe."

"Yeah."

Irby beat his knee with his fist. "I've been stupid, blind stupid! A

dozen times a day they've said things to tip me off, careless things, and I was too blind in love to hear them! Bolds, what would you do?"

"I'd do it different than you, kid. My ideas wouldn't help you."

"You'd shoot Danciger and stomp the guts out of Marta, wouldn't you?"

"That's close enough."

"And me?"

"I'll saddle your horse," Frank said. "And tell you how to get out of here."

"Thanks, Bolds."

The kid had lost everything he had for that woman, for nothing. She'd never had enough men or money, she never would have enough.

And Janet? All she wanted was Frank Bolds and the chance to be with him, even on a dried up and robbed out ranch. How big a fool could a man be?

"You want the horse, kid?"

"I don't know, Bolds, I just don't know!"

The voices were louder now then faded as Marta and Danciger came back to the camp. Marta sprawled with calculated ease; even in the starlight she had to be flingy. Danciger stood across from Irby and an equal distance from Frank Bolds.

This was more than the kid could take in one dose and make a decision. He needs time to think about it.

"Did you two decide to kill me now or wait a couple of days?" Irby asked.

Marta sat up with a gasp. Danciger didn't move, he was already still, but he seemed twice as still now. Both of them were staring at Irby in the reflected starlight.

"Have you gone crazy, Ken?" Marta asked.

"I've been crazy," Irby said. "Crazy in love, and crazy stupid. Not now though."

"Better forget that kind of talk," Danciger said.

Frank could feel Danciger's furtive glances, the bare movements of his head. He was worried about Frank Bolds, the unknown, he figured that Irby had been talking, maybe Frank offering his solution, it was in the certainty with which the kid spoke.

It's the way Danciger will think, Frank thought, that will ring me into it. He can make just one thing out of this, the way he'd do it. He figures

the kid has cut me in for my help. That's the reason he didn't shoot the kid the moment he spoke up. He'll figure I'm the tough baby, I'm the one he'll have to get first, the kid can come anytime.

"You'd all better turn in," Frank said. "We ride at midnight."

"A good idea," Danciger said.

IRBY TOOK his blankets across the draw, Marta spread hers where she was and Frank could see her vaguely, the way she kept, apparently, looking the twenty feet across there at the kid by the little drift. Danciger moved to the edge on the same side as Marta and several yards away. Frank moved back toward the horses, and in the scattered mesquite that dotted the draw with their small drifts.

Danciger wasn't worried about the kid, Frank thought, he wants me. He'll worry about me. Then the kid.

Janet had it figured. A man couldn't associate with this sort of thing without some of it rubbing off. The thing he ought to do was saddle his horse and get the devil out. That would be the smart thing. He didn't get the kid into this. A man had to kill his own snakes.

Be smart, Bolds.

He rerolled his blanket and tied the string around it. He picked it up, turning for the horses, when Irby called stridently, "Watch out, Bolds!"

Instantly, Frank moved back into the deep shadow of the mesquite, his sixshooter in his hand. There were two sharp reports. A small caliber pistol. Irby made an abrupt, hurt sound.

Those shots had come from Marta. She'd shot Irby.

The horses milled and blew, pulling at stake ropes. Frank thought he saw vague movement yonder but he held his fire. Then he did see it, the flit of shadows, and heard the small sound Danciger made.

He was a dangerous man, all right. He was out of his element here in the desert, in the gravelly terrain, and the dried grass and leaves and sticks; he was damn quiet for an alley man.

He wasn't more than thirty feet or less away. Less. Frank used the night sight trick of looking not directly at an object. He figured the angle of that flitting shape and the cover yon-

der and picked the place where Danciger would be. A gnarled mesquite there had caught a considerable drift and it made a wide shadow, a deep black place there. He could be anywhere in it.

Irby made a soft, moaning sound and Marta fired again. Irby was quiet. If the kid wasn't out or dead, he'd better be quiet.

He'd be quiet permanent if he didn't. The she-cougar had shown her claws. Get a tough woman down on you, brother, and you've had it!

Frank returned his sixshooter to his belt and with studied slowness, he undid the string from his blanket. He took plenty of time to move clear of the branches of the tree and partly unrolled the blanket. He took the loose blanket in his left hand, being sure to have no hanging corners, and then he drew his sixshooter again, and laid his line of sight on that deep shadow yonder.

He threw the blanket to his left, swinging it in a free arc across his body then to his left in a long throw, not hard enough to make a noise. It sailed, then folded to hang on a cactus, rustling the leaves on the ground, and making a long shadow there, moving a little.

Danciger fired twice, his gunflame spurting at the blanket, jerking it. Frank Bolds fired three shots slightly to the right of those stabbing flames. Danciger fired again, but the direction of his fire was into the ground. Frank heard the sound of his falling, then the brief thrash and rattle. Then silence.

FRANK WAITED, squatted on his heels, six-shooter in hand.

"Dan?" Marta called softly. "Dan?"

The silence dragged on, and finally, Frank got up and eased on to the horses. He saddled all of them, led them out of the draw and tied them. He went back and got Danciger's body and tied it on his horse.

"Dan!" Marta shrilled.

"Start a fire so I can see you," Frank said.

Marta screamed. Then after awhile she said, "I don't know how!"

"Pile up some leaves and twigs and put a match to them," Frank said coldly. "Then put on the bigger stuff."

Matches are in the pack."

He heard her rustling and then her sharp cries as she got hold of cactus. But finally she had a fire going, a bright flaring of leaves and twigs. She fed it larger stuff.

Frank said, "Lay the popgun by the fire so I can see it."

She did and Frank came up to throw the gun into the night. Then he went to Irby and brought him to the fire. He was shot twice. One wound was in the muscles of his arm, another had hit the base of his neck, nearly missing him then ranging downward off the collar bone to come out behind. A nasty wound and maybe a bad one. The kid was looking at Marta, his eyes large and dark in the flickering light.

"Still Mexico, kid?" Frank asked.

"No. I'm going home. With Uncle Wayne's jewels."

"No!" Marta burst out. She came alive, shouting things, screaming. Telling him what a miserly so-and-so his uncle was, the things they could do with that money. How Danciger had threatened her, and Irby, if she didn't make like she fell in with him.

"Will you help me to town, Bolds? And to the sheriff?"

"Yes. I got an urgent piece of business to attend to in town myself. With the sheriff's daughter."

"I'm not going to jail!" Marta

screamed. She jerked a thin dagger from her boot and leaped at Frank.

Frank Bolds hit her a backhanded, solid swipe that tumbled her into a heap. He kicked the dagger away. She was crying and beating the ground when Frank picked up the kid and carried him to his horse.

"Can you make it, kid? We'll get a wagon at my place."

"I can make it!"

Frank pulled the satchel off Danciger's belt and hung it over the horn of the kid's saddle. He mounted.

Marta screamed. She seemed to realize she was practically alone. "You can't leave me like this!"

"Here's your horse," Frank said. "Please yourself."

"Where'll I go in this godforsaken place? What'll I do to live?"

Frank opened his mouth to tell her but Irby beat him to it. "You'll make out, Marta. The way you can fling them hips, you'll eat!"

To Frank that seemed to sum it up pretty well. Besides, he didn't have any more time to waste thinking of Marta. He was going to do his thinking about another woman, a woman who wanted him and all the hard work that went with him.

He could tell Janet that he didn't make this last trip after all. He didn't need to, all he wanted was there in town.... ●END

BLOOD IN HIS EYE

(cont'd from page 27)

It was Bob's turn to grin sheepishly. "Well, I was on my way home, when I saw you way up ahead. Then three men fell in behind you and I thought it was a good time to bone up on one of my lessons—page 3, paragraph 4: *'Trailing by Sight and Sound.'* Lucky I did, I reckon, but any man would have pitched in and helped."

Slim drew a deep breath. His face turned red. He looked from Bob to Cissy, then to Pop Jones, and back again to Bob Callon. "Gee, I'm sorry I got het up, Bob," he said. Then an expression of pain and sacrifice settled on his face. "Reckon the best man wins, feller. So I'll be hopping along. Good luck to the both of you. Well, I'll be seeing you."

"Hold on!" Callon's face gathered

stern lines. "As a federal officer I command you to stay where you are, while Pop and I go outside and look at some prize beef he has."

A boyish grin scattered the stern lines, and he added: "By the way, chum, bring Cissy up to the house tonight to supper. But don't bust in with blood in your eye like you did just now, for I want you to meet my wife and the swellest little youngster you ever saw, and you might scare them out of a year's growth if you look like you did a while ago."

Slim felt soft arms creep around his neck from behind. A warm kiss planted just above his collar raised the hairs on his neck and reddened his tanned cheeks. "Dad gum, Cissy," he said, "that ain't no way to kiss a man!" ●END

NOTHING TO RUN FROM

by RAY G. ELLIS

Sure, Early had worn a star once. Then a killer had ridden in and in the gunfight one of the outlaw's bullets killed Early's girl. So, no, Early wouldn't be wearing a star again...

JOEL EARLY knew that the man who moved up next to him at the bar was named Garrett Tuber. Somebody had told him that. But nobody had to tell him that Tuber was a gunman. That was written all over the fellow—the arrogant manner, the tied-down holster, the perpetually moving eyes—these things were plainer than the written word.

"Wood Holten wants to talk to you, Early," Tuber said just loud enough.

"Let him talk," Early said without shifting his eyes from the row of bottles behind the bar.

"Holten's mayor of this burg. He does his talkin' in his office."

"I don't."

Early felt, rather than saw, the gunman stiffen; a tightening of the muscles that sent tension between them. Tuber said even-voiced, "It'd be worth your while, Early."

Joel caught the forced restraint in Tuber's voice and he turned toward the gunman. Garrett Tuber looked up at him, light gray eyes expressionless.

His mouth was small, thin-lipped. The hat he wore was too big for the thin face.

"You'd like to try me, wouldn't you, Tuber?" Joel said, a smile touching the corners of his mouth. "It's just killin' you, wonderin' who's the fastest. Why don't you ask your sidekick, Hip Doyle? He'll tell you."

Tuber stared at Early for a moment before he said, "Holten's waitin', Early."

Joel turned away from the gunman and moved toward the door of the saloon. He felt a tickling sensation between his shoul-



From his half-sitting position Early brought up his pistol and squeezed off a shot.

ler blades, although he was certain hat Garrett Tuber wouldn't back-hoot him. Men stared curiously at Early, trying to see inside this man that had shot Hip Doyle less than an hour ago. They wondered which way he would turn.

Early went through the batwings and stopped on the walk in front of the saloon. He surveyed the streets of Mercer before he pulled a small cigar from the pocket of his vest and lit it.

This town, false-fronted, sun-baked, dusty, looked like a hundred others that he had visited in the past two years but there was something underneath about to erupt. It was like the vague trembling of the earth before the eruption of a volcano.

He didn't like the town nor the people in it from what he'd seen of them in the two days he'd been in Mercer. But a man in need of money has no business being particular.

He crossed the street and entered a doorway. A narrow flight of stairs led upward and he took these two at a time. At the top he met a closed door which he shoved open without knocking. He was in Wood Holten's office.

The mayor looked up from his desk and said, "Come in, Early. Nobody knocks on the door."

Early moved into the room and a smile touched the corners of his mouth. He had irritated Holten by showing in without knocking and it gave him a certain pleasure. Holten went back to studying the papers on his desk as Early came across the room and took a chair.

He sat down and waited. When Holten said nothing, he rose from the chair and went to the door, pulling it open.

"Here," Holten called after him. "I wanted to talk to you."

"That's what I was told by a proddy gent named Tuber. Thought he must have made a mistake when you didn't seem to have nothin' on your mind but them papers."

Early closed the door again and came back into the room. Holten surveyed him narrowly, his face creased in a scowl. Early judged the mayor to be about thirty-five, five years older than Early himself. He was surprised. He had expected an older man.

"You don't look like a gunman to me," Holten said.

"Maybe I'm not."

"You got Hip Doyle."

"He asked for it. I gave it to him."

"You could have killed him and yet you didn't."

"They don't hang a man for gettin' too big for his britches. Why should I kill him?"

HOLTEN leaned back in his swivel chair and studied Early for a time. Then he leaned forward again and said, "You talk like a lawman."

Early's voice held a trace of bitterness as he said shortly, "I'm not." He rose from the chair and added, "You could have asked me that at first and saved yourself some time."

"Wait," Holten said, a ghost of a smile lighting his face. "Who's gettin' proddy now? I wanted to offer you a job."

Early remained standing. "Doin' what?" he asked, doubt strong in his voice.

"For a starter, you might collect some overdue rent for me."

"Nothin' doin'. That ain't my kind of work."

"For a hundred a month?"

Early rubbed his chin with a large hand and looked out the window behind the mayor. It wouldn't take long to get a stake at that rate. Then he could move on.

Holten drew a leather wallet from his coat pocket and extracted several bills. He said, "Here's fifty in advance. If you do a good job we'll call that a bonus."

Still Early hesitated. He felt as if he was being rushed into something that he didn't cotton to in the beginning. Still, a hundred a month was good pay. It would buy a lot of grub for the pack horse he had in the livery stable. He took the bills and shoved them into the front pocket of his vest.

Holten picked up a paper from his desk and handed it to Early. It was a list of names.

"Those are all the people that rent from me, Early. Most of them are businessmen, although I own some houses, too. The ones with a check mark after their names are the ones

that owe me plenty of money."

Early folded the paper and put it in the pocket with the bills.

"From the length of that list, I'd say that you own a good piece of Mercer, Holten," Early said.

A fleeting smile crossed the mayor's face. He said, "You're right, Early, I do. And from now on it's Mr. Holten."

Early went to the door and pulled it open as Holten said, "I wouldn't try to run out with the rent money, Early. It's been tried before."

The urge to chuck the whole thing was strong in Early. He knew that if he had any sense he would throw the money and the list of names in Holten's face and ride out of Mercer. Only he had no money. He pulled the door closed behind him and went down to the street.

Tuber stood in the shade of the awning in front of the saloon across the street. When he saw Early emerge from the doorway he swung across the street to meet him.

"He hire you?" Tuber asked.

Early looked down at the smaller man, disliking the demanding note in his voice, but he nodded.

Tuber grinned, showing crooked teeth. He said, "That means you work for me, Early."

"That wasn't part of the deal," Early said. "I'm supposed to collect past due rent."

Tuber nodded, still grinning. "Everybody starts that way," he told Early. "That's what I was doin' three years ago. Now I take orders directly from Holten. You take 'em from me."

Early scowled.

Tuber said softly, "You can always quit if you don't like it."

He didn't like it but he knew he wasn't going to quit, not after that soft-voiced challenge. He shrugged his acceptance and Tuber said, "You can go collect your rents."

Early moved off down the street toward the center of town. The list Holten had given him contained only names of people and Early had no idea what businesses went with what names. He remembered the first name on the list was Henry Merriam.

He stopped in front of a store. Over the door was a large sign with white

letters on a red background. The red was faded. The sign read: "Dry Goods." Early went inside.

FOR A MOMENT he could see nothing so blinding had been the sun in the street. Gradually his eyes grew accustomed to the dim interior. He saw movement toward the back of the store and he said, "I'm looking for Henry Merriam."

"You won't find him here." It was a girl's voice and held humor. She came out of the dim recesses of the store, squinting against the brightness of the street behind Early.

She was small, he saw, and dark-haired. When her eyes grew accustomed to the light and she opened them wider, he saw they were dark, also. A pretty girl, he thought. When she recognized him the smile dropped from her face.

"Mr. Merriam owns the Boot and Saddle Shop two doors down," she told him, studying him openly as she spoke.

Early touched the brim of his hat and thanked her. He turned to go when her voice stopped him.

"Mr. Early," she said. When he turned back to face her, she dropped her eyes from him but went on talking. "I want to...to ask you something."

He waited, smiling inwardly as the girl studied the gun at his hip. He guessed her thoughts and said, "That's the one that did it, ma'm."

The girl flushed. Then she seemed to steel herself and she said, "If you want a job, Marshal Sam Ross needs a deputy."

"This town is just full of jobs," Early said. "Why me?"

"Sam needs a man like you, Mr. Early. He—"

"What kind of a man am I, Mrs.—"

"Miss Marin Webster. I'm sorry, Mr. Early. I didn't mean that the way you think. It's just that Sam Ross is alone and he can't handle the job without help. Evidently you weren't afraid of Doyle and—"

"I've got a job, Miss Webster," Early said. "Besides I got no hanker to wear the lawman's star."

"Henry Merriam," she muttered to herself. Suddenly things added up for

her and her eyes sparked. She moved closer to him and he caught the faint scent of perfume. But there was nothing faint about her voice as she said, "You're working for Holten collectin' rents."

He saw the scorn on her face and thought: Who loves a bill collector? He nodded and said, "It pays good."

"I've nothing more to say to you," Marin Webster told him shortly. She turned and retreated into the darkness of the shelves at the back of the store.

Early shook his head as he left the building. There was more behind her actions than a natural dislike for bill collectors. When he was on the street he drew the list of names from his pocket and checked it. There was no Webster listed there, either as paid up or owing rent.

His eye caught on some small lettering at the bottom corner of the dry goods store. "Marin Webster, Owner," he read. Now why would she be so blamed put out when she owed Holten nothing?

HE WENT down the street to Merriam's saddle shop. Henry Merriam was sure going to be one individual not glad to see Early. He shoved on into the shop and saw Merriam, a slight, balding man talking to someone on the near side of the counter. When the man turned, Early recognized Marshal Sam Ross.

The marshal nodded shortly and mumbled, "Early."

Joel returned the nod, then faced Merriam. He said, "You're Henry Merriam?"

Merriam looked at Early through steel-rimmed spectacles. A heavy canvas apron covered his clothes. He had the air of a craftsman about him and Early guessed that he was a topnotch man at his trade. Only he didn't pay his bills.

Merriam nodded. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

"You can pay your rent," Early told him. "I'm collectin' for Holten."

Merriam shot a look at Ross. The marshal shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. Early saw this out of the corner of his eye. He said, "Is there somethin' wrong about payin' your rent, Marshal?"

Ross was a man in his forties. Early had seen the type before—getting along, living on a reputation built years before, still not ready to acknowledge defeat at the hands of time. Early felt a little sorry for him.

"I'm sorry to see you take that job, Early," the marshal said. "I thought you were tagged differently."

Early chuckled. "What do you pay your deputies—when you have any?"

"Fifty a month."

This time Early laughed aloud. "My tag, as you put it, reads more than that."

"Is that all that counts with you?" Merriam asked.

Early swung toward the man, his jaw set. His words clipped out hard and brittle as he said, "You got no room to talk. You look like you could afford the rent you ain't paid yet."

At the words Ross chuckled drily. He said, "He's right, Henry. I told you to keep up on the rent. That's one payment that Holten collects legally in this town."

Early turned back to the marshal. Something in Ross' words aroused his curiosity. He asked, "What else does Holten collect?"

Merriam cut in again, saying, "You ain't heard about the other payments?" When Early shook his head Merriam looked doubtful but went on. "Them that makes the other payment don't have any trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Early asked.

The saddlemaker shrugged and said, "Things like robbery, fires in the stock room. All sorts of little things."

"Does everybody pay this—this tribute?"

"Most everybody, 'cept those on the inside."

"What about this Marin Webster woman?"

Merriam smiled with one side of his mouth. "You met her then," he said. When Early nodded, Merriam told him, "She don't pay."

"She's in with Holten? Then why did—"

"She ain't in with him," Ross broke in, "but Holten would like her to be. She hates the sight of him but he still

hopes that some day she'll see it his way."

"What do you think of our mayor now, Mr. Early?" Merriam asked.

Early looked away and said, "I was hired to collect legal bills. When I get enough money I'll leave this burg and you won't have to worry about me anymore."

"That's what Garrett Tuber said three years ago," Ross said.

"Look," Early began, tiring of the pressure tactics of Ross and Merriam. "If you don't like Holten, why don't you get rid of him?"

"We got a council here," Merriam said. "Most of the councilmen are honest. That way we got a check on Holten. If we take him out of office he might run wild, like an uncaged mountain lion."

AT THAT moment one of the saloon hangers-on broke into Merriam's shop. He was out of breath from the run across the street and his eyes were wide.

"Marshal," the small man gasped. "They're gonna shoot up the saloon."

"Simmer down, Tiny," Ross said calmly. "Who's goin' to shoot up the saloon?"

Tiny looked around the room, hardly seeing the other men. Early knew what was coming and a certain admiration for Sam Ross was born in him at the calm way in which Ross handled himself.

"Garrett Tuber and the rest of that bunch," Tiny told them. "They been drinkin' too much and they're actin' crazy-like."

"That's strange," Early said. "I was over there just a while ago. They hadn't had too much to drink then."

The marshal turned to Early and said, "I'll handle this, Early. You just tend to your bill collectin'."

Early shrugged. You'll come out of that saloon feet first if you try to handle it alone, he thought.

Ross moved to the door and Early saw him lift the gun at his hip once to test his draw. Don't go in there alone, Early thought. You haven't a chance.

Ross looked back at Merriam once and Early saw the tight-lipped look about him, the gray face, the resignation in his eyes. He knows he'll not

come out alive, Early mused. He checked an impulse to accompany Ross. It was none of his business in the first place. Secondly, he knew Ross would never let him come along.

Early turned back to Merriam and said, "If you got that rent money, I'll take it with me."

Pure disgust was written on Merriam's face as he drew open a drawer and lifted out the money. You have to pay whether a man gets killed or not, Early wanted to say. He took the money from Merriam and shoved it into his pocket.

When he was on the street again he saw that Marshal Ross had already entered the saloon. He waited, listening. Not a sound came from the saloon. He pictured how it would be. Ross braced by a grinning Tuber, the rest of Holten's gunhands ready to horn in if anything went wrong. And Holten sat innocently in his office.

How long he stood waiting, Early couldn't remember. But it seemed only seconds later that the crashing of gunfire reverberated through town. Then a silence more penetrating than the last settled over Mercer.

The batwings of the saloon flew wide like the wings of a frightened bird and Sam Ross backed out, doubled over, to fall backward into the street. The batwings swung empty once, then one of the gunhands came through, gun drawn. He poised on the edge of the walk, ready to finish off Ross who lay moaning in the middle of the street.

Early shot the gunhand. With hardly a thought, the gun had leaped into his hand and had blasted life from Sam Ross' would-be assassin. The gunhand twisted and fell forward over the rail in front of the saloon.

Tuber had fired the first shot in the saloon, Early thought as he ran toward Sam Ross. A man like Tuber would let no one steal his thunder. The other of Holten's men got the leavings of Tuber's lust. Only there was one less of these carrion feeders now.

AS EARLY reached Ross' side, he saw a procession of Holten's men come from the saloon to stand expressionless behind the rail as Early examined the wound. Ross had been

shot in the middle. Whether the bullet had punctured the marshal's stomach, Early could not tell.

"Is he dead?"

Early turned to Marin Webster. The girl was white-faced. In her hand she held a folded blanket.

"No he's not dead—yet," Early told her. "We'll have to get him off the street. Give me the blanket."

He spread the blanket on the ground and with the help of several bystanders shifted Ross into it. Six of them lifted the blanket and carried Ross into the coolness of Marin Webster's Dry Goods Store.

"Somebody get the doctor," Early said.

"He's already been sent for," Marin told him. Early stood up, conscious of the girl's nearness. He felt a little unclean as if he had been partly responsible for the shooting of the marshal.

"There's nothing much we can do now but wait," Early said to no one in particular.

"And pray," Marin Webster added quietly.

Early left the store as the doctor hurried in. Early doubted that the doctor could do much for Ross. The corner of one of the bills Henry Merriam had given him protruded from a pocket of Early's vest. He drew out the small bundle and walked across the street.

Garrett Tuber and several others were standing in front of the saloon. Early noticed that the body of the dead gunman had already been removed. He handed the roll of bills to Tuber.

"What's this for?" Tuber asked.

"That's Merriam's rent money. It belongs to Holten."

"Give it to him, then," Tuber said, extending the money toward Early.

"I quit," Early turned on his heel and headed for the livery stable down the street. Just as he turned away he read disappointment in Tuber's eyes.

If he stayed in Mercer, Early knew he'd face Tuber across guns no matter who he worked for. The killer had seen Early's speed with a gun and Tuber would never rest easy until he found out who was the faster. But that wasn't going to happen because Early wasn't going to stay in Mercer.

Two days before, he'd ridden into the town, and now he had killed two men when all he'd wanted to do was drift through.

From the stable Early got the roan he rode and the piebald pack horse. There was nothing to load on the packhorse so he saddled and rode from the stable.

Tuber watched as he rode by. A trace of a grin touched the gunman's mouth. He thinks I'm scared, Early thought. It made no difference to Early what Tuber thought—what anyone thought.

Three or four men stood in the doorway of the dry goods store. Early found himself studying the front of the store but Marin was inside for he could not catch sight of her.

When he was almost past, the group of men broke up and Marin came through. She looked up at Early for a moment, indecision written on her face. Then she said, "Wait."

EARLY REINED in, knowing all the time that the only sensible thing to do was dig spurs into the side of the roan and leave Mercer as fast as possible.

He looked down at the girl and she said, "I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you, Mr. Early. I...I want to thank you for saving Sam's life."

"He'll live then?"

"I don't know yet. But at least you gave him a chance."

Early touched his hat and turned to leave.

"What are you running from?" Marin asked before he could move away.

The question cut into him sharply and he turned back. "Nothing," he said shortly.

"Then please stay. Without Sam we're without hope. He regained consciousness. He could swear you in as deputy."

"No."

"You are running," Marin said sharply.

Early swung from the saddle and stood over the girl. He was silent for a moment, then, when he spoke, the words came out so hard and bitter that Marin felt their impact as if they were cast in iron.

"I wore a star once," Early told her. "Yes. I held a town in the palm of my hand. Then there was a gunfight. A killer had ridden in and I had to call him. I won, all right, but I lost, too. One of the killer's bullets hit the girl I was going to marry, and she died. I've been trying to find a place where people will leave me alone, where I can forget. Do you understand?"

"You can't forget by running," Marin told him. Her eyes were soft and there was pain in them for him. When Early said nothing, she went on, "You're stamped lawman, just like Sam Ross is stamped lawman. Everytime a man like Garrett Tuber sees you, something inside him crawls. To rid himself of that he has to kill. You are the law, Mr. Early, whether you wear the star or not. You can't escape that."

"So what do I do about it?"

Marin gripped his forearm and her words pleaded with him. "Wear the star, Mr. Early. You can hold *this* town in the palm of your hand. If you leave, we're lost."

Early looked down at Marin. So like that other girl, he thought. But yet different. Marin had spoken words that reached deep inside him, changing him so that he would never be quite the same again, whether he stayed or not.

A man suddenly approached them from the doorway of Marin's store. He said to Marin, in a low voice, "He's goin' fast, Miss Webster."

She turned and looked up at Early and her eyes said more than words ever could. He wet his dry lips with his tongue, then moved toward the rail in front of the store. When he had tied the two horses, he went inside where Sam Ross lay dying.

"Stay off the street," Early ordered Marin Webster. The words were hard, positive. "Don't walk this street until I tell you it's all right."

She nodded in understanding, a half smile at her lips. Early colored at the smile. This girl understood more about a man than any girl had a right to.

He left her in the doorway of the store and stepped into the sunlight. Sam Ross' star on his shirt sent a flashing beam of reflected light as

Early moved across the street toward the saloon.

Go to meet trouble, Early had learned long ago. Wait for it and you give it the upper hand.

BEFORE he was halfway across the street, the batwings swung open, vomiting out Tuber and two others. They stopped, studying Early, and Early could almost see that crawling thing inside Tuber that Marin had talked about.

The men on each side of Tuber drew away from him. Early understood that he would be fighting three of them. First Tuber, then the others. There would be no one to side him as he had sided Sam Ross.

"You killed the marshal, Tuber," Early said. "I've come to arrest you."

Tuber's voice was cold, flat, as he said, "Don't come any farther, law snake. I should have known what you were when you came into town. Something inside warned me."

"That was your mistake. Throw down your guns." Early knew that Tuber would never do what he was told. Without his guns, the man was nothing and he knew it. This was the feinting and parrying, the preliminary thrusts of a prize fighter.

Then Tuber tired of waiting. His hand snapped down and up and it was filled with metallic death. But Early moved with the swiftness of a striking rattler and his pistol roared savagely, its lead catching Tuber high in the chest, slamming him backward so that his shot went through the awning over his head.

Early didn't waste more lead on the gurny. He shifted to his right and fired once again. With gun half out of holster, Tuber's left hand man screamed, grabbing for his stomach, and pitched onto his face.

But it had taken Early too much time. As he turned back toward the third man, the outlaw gun spoke. Early twisted, carried around by the blow of the bullet. He tripped over his own feet and went down.

The outlaw gun spoke again but the bullet kicked up harmless dust at Early's feet. Early brought his pistol up
(please turn to page 45)

ROBIN HOOD IN ECHO VALLEY

by CAMERON ROOSEVELT

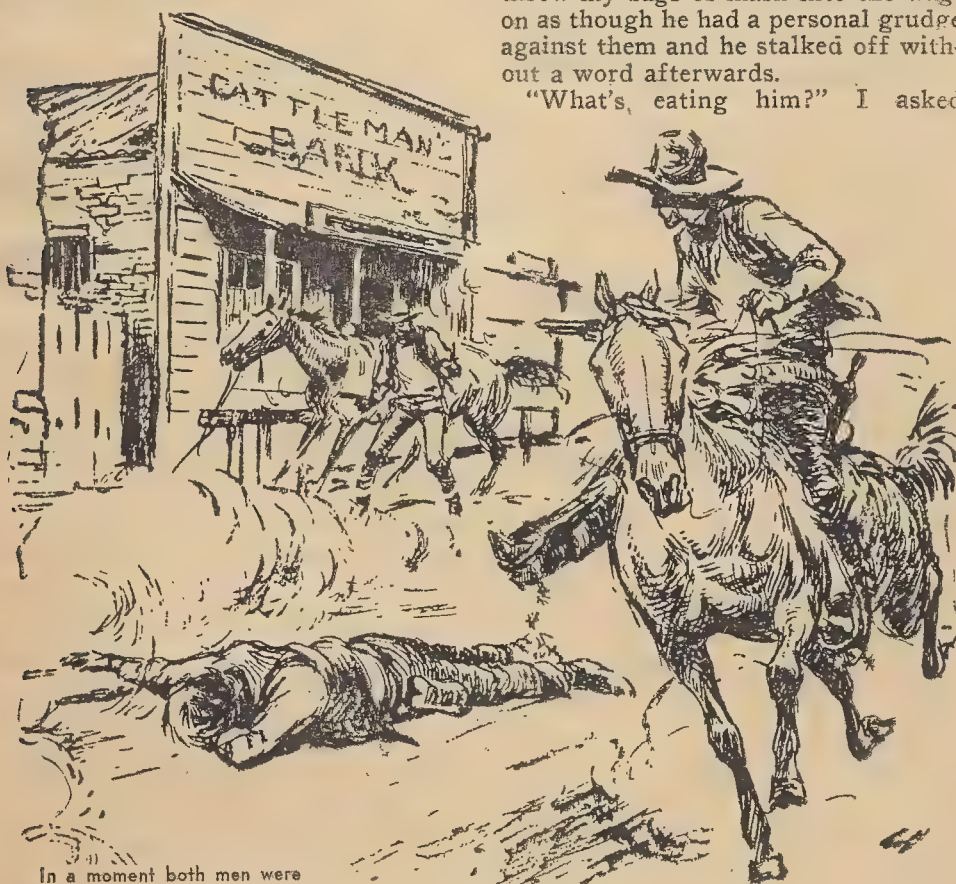
WHENEVER I want any gossip about the people in Echo Valley, I look up my friend Ralph Green. Ralph runs the general store, which is the town. I mean the store is just a dot in a sea of Texas chaparral, that's all there is. But eve-

The button might just as easily have wanted to become a famous Texas Ranger, but no, he chose to be a famous outlaw

ry cowboy in the area drifts in to Ralph's once a month or so, to sit on the counter and eat a can of peaches while he unloads the news from his part of the range and soaks up the happenings elsewhere. Without Ralph, Echo Valley would have had to publish a newspaper, which was out of the question.

I hadn't been to the store in a long time and when I drove in for some mash I found Ralph had a new clerk. He was a gangly young fellow about nineteen with the most sullen and angry expression I have ever seen. He threw my bags of mash into the wagon as though he had a personal grudge against them and he stalked off without a word afterwards.

"What's eating him?" I asked



In a moment both men were tearing out of the town with bullets screaming around them.

Ralph, when we were alone in the store. The kid had disappeared into the storehouse in back.

Ralph sighed. "There is a walking example of ambition frustrated and denied," he said.

"Ambition?" I repeated. "Looks like his only ambition is to get everyone to hate him. What was his ambition, Ralph?"

"You don't recognize him? Don't you remember little Stan Tobias?"

The name sounded familiar and gradually a picture of a carrot-topped kid with some gaps in his front teeth came back to me. "Stan Tobias? That him?"

"He's growed since you seen him last. And he has also become the victim of civilization, you might say."

I looked out at the desolate sea of scrub whose society was composed mostly of road runners and gila monsters and reflected that if this much civilization had crushed Stan Tobias he would have done poorly indeed in a town.

"You got to understand ambition," Ralph pursued. "It's a strange thing and takes strange shapes. Now, Stan Tobias' ambition was simple enough. He wanted to be a famous outlaw."

I nodded over half a peach. "I can understand that. He might just as easily have wanted to become a famous Texas Ranger."

"Sure, but law and order didn't have the spell for him that the owlhoot did. Reckon he saw himself as a Texas Robin Hood, avengin' the poor and despoiling the filthy rich—like me."...

It came, Ralph said, of living on a hog-poor forty acres next to a big rich and powerful ranch like Collin's J-C. Old man Tobias was middling shiftless and the kids never had enough to eat, went barefoot most of the time, and had one pair of jeans each held up by a string, for clothes.

Stan was too young to know that fathers might be different. He heard about the rich robbing the poor and he saw the big house, the fat herds, the oozing prosperity of the J-C. John Collins didn't help much either, being a loud, self-satisfied windbag, who never stopped being overwhelmed

with his own cleverness and business ability and general superiority over ordinary mortals.

TRUE, OLD Tobias wasn't much. But Collins did crowd him and shove his scrawny stock around and try to do him out of his fair share of the water and grass. So the kid heard plenty about the injustice of the rich and poor while he was going without enough to eat most of the time.

He was about sixteen when he rode his sway-backed old horse up out of a swale near the edge of their forty and found a couple of rustlers taking off with some of Collins' fat Herefords.

These two boys were Luke Monroe and Solomon Rudd, a pair of free-wheeling hellions who would rather steal than work anytime and rather fight than either.

Young Stan, being range-bred, took in the situation at a glance. His eyes lit up. The whole business crystallized in his mind like the answer to a problem which had been plaguing him.

"Hold up," he shouted, "and I'll go with you!"

It's risky business, riding up on a pair of rustlers attending to business. Monroe and Rudd had drawn guns like a streak of lightning and Stan never knew how close he came to ending his career right then. But there's a special Providence, they say, and it must have been this which held them up just a second or two until they saw it was just a kid charging down on them—an unarmed kid at that.

"I want to go with you!" Stan panted, as he came up.

The two outlaws glanced at each other.

"Kid, go home," Luke Monroe said.

"You don't understand!" Stan shouted. "I want to join your wild bunch. I want to ride with you!"

Solomon Rudd scratched his chin with the muzzle of his pistol. The situation had elements of humor, but he had no time to enjoy the joke.

"We haven't got a 'wild bunch'," he said, "and we don't need you. Now get on home and forget you seen us."

"Listen," Stan pleaded. "I can show you where Collins grazes his best cattle. We'll rob the old buzzard blind!"

"We'll do all right without you," Monroe said. "Now get on home. I won't tell you again!"

Stan opened his mouth to argue some more, which might have been unfortunate for him. But just at that moment, a bunch of J-C cowboys rode over the rise and spotted them.

They saw the two outlaws with drawn guns and young Stan Tobias between them. The conclusion was obvious. The kid was trying to protect J-C cattle and the rustlers had him cold.

With yells and shots the whole contingent of J-C punchers swung into action, charging down on them like a troop of cavalry.

Luke Montoe cursed bitterly. "Now see what you've gone and done—holding us up. I oughta bat you one!"

But he and Rudd clapped spurs to their horses and began to sift sand getting away from there, leaving cows and Stan behind. Not that Stan wanted it that way. He clapped his heels into his nag's sides too, and did his best to keep up with them. But their horses were superior—they drew away rapidly, shouting at him all the time to go home. Meantime, bullets were whistling all around from the pursuing cowboys.

The J-C men caught up rapidly to Stan. They were overcome with admiration that an unarmed boy would chase a pair of dangerous rustlers.

"Go on home, kid!" a puncher shouted as he swept past. "We'll take it from here!"

"Go on home, go on home," Stan grumbled, watching pursued and pursuers disappear over the swells. "That's all I hear, 'go on home.' I'll show 'em!"

Just what he was going to show them wasn't clear in his mind. But he was greatly dissatisfied with the morning's events. Even finding himself a minor hero irritated him—and getting credit for saving Collins' beef.

THE OUTLAWS had made good their escape and were presumed to be holed-up somewhere in the hills. Stan didn't want to be on Collins' side, he wanted to be on the side of the outlaws. So the idea was born.

One thing the kid could do—he

could track like a wolf. A life on his own, eking out meagre rations with rabbit and prairie chicken, had developed in him a nose for the trail that an Indian might have envied. He packed corn bread and fat-back and set out to trail the outlaws.

It took him three days, for they were no slouches at covering their tracks, and he was mighty hungry before he saw the hidden glow of their campfire. He crept up and hid in a thicket and listened to their talk. That way he was the first one to hear about the bank job they were planning.

The original idea to bust in on them died still-born. This was more exciting. Banks were even fairer game than old man Collins. Hadn't he heard his father going on for hours about the blood-sucking money-lenders? He craned his ears to hear.

Luke Monroe was drawing a map in the sand with a stick.

"I ride in first," he said. "I scout the town, see that everything's quiet, watch them open the bank, see that nothing special is there in the way of guards. You come in half an hour behind me. I'll give you the signal if everything is clear. You come up and stand in the doorway to cover me. I'll go in the bank and cover the teller and customers—if there are any."

"What about the horses?" Rudd asked.

"We'll have to take a chance on them being ground-hitched. You can't stay with them—you've got to cover me in the doorway in case someone comes in."

"They might spook if there's some shooting."

"They've heard plenty of shooting. They'll be all right."

Stan backed away, thrilled to his core. This was something like it. A big bank job! He saw himself riding home, laden with bags of gold, to distribute to the poor and needy. He'd show 'em.

His work was obviously cut out for him too. They needed someone to hold the horses. Well, they didn't know it, but they had just acquired someone.

He camped out in the thicket close by, suffering the cold and the hunger pains in his stomach without protest.

Soon now there would be plenty for everyone. And when Monroe and Rudd saw how much help he had been they would be proud and glad to take him into their wild bunch. In fact, in a few years—he was off in a wonderful fantasy of being the leader of the bunch, of giving orders to Monroe and Rudd and having them come humbly to him for advice as he planned one daring job after another.

With dawn he was up and saddled and waiting for the outlaws to move. They broke camp leisurely, after a good breakfast, whose smells tormented him. But at last they got under way and he followed them at a discreet distance.

At the edge of town they separated. Luke Monroe went in first, as planned. Sol Rudd waited, and behind him, Stan Tobias waited too. When Rudd got up to go, Stan trickled along invisibly.

THE TOWN was quiet and peaceful in the morning sun as Stan walked his horse into the one street. Halfway down the road Luke Monroe's horse stood with dragging reins, outside the bank. Luke was coming down the boardwalk, just turning into the bank. Sol Rudd was just reaching Luke's horse, swinging down, ground-reining his own pony and moving to the bank doorway, about ten feet behind Luke.

Then things happened fast. There was the muffled crash of a shot inside the bank. From somewhere a man shouted an alarm and footsteps pounded on the board sidewalk. A fat man with a marshal's star ran heavily toward the bank.

Solomon Rudd whipped around and sent a shot toward the marshal. The fat one dived for the shelter of a trash barrel and began to pump lead toward the bank doorway. The outlaws' horses began to rear in fright.

This, Stan Tobias, thought, with a lift of his heart, was his cue. Now he was needed. He gipped his old horse violently and charged into the hail of lead, clutching hands out-thrust for the whipping reins of the outlaws' horses.

Spitting lead, Solomon Rudd whirled and ran from the bank door-

way toward his horse. Right behind him, Luke Monroe appeared, both arms burdened with a pair of heavy sacks.

Stan, Luke and Rudd all reached the horses at the same moment. Stan's old horse, wild with excitement, failed to clear the charging figures of the men. He bumped Luke Monroe solidly with his chest and the outlaw went over like a bowling pin. The bags of specie thudded into the dust.

Solomon Rudd had leaped to his saddle like a pole vaulter. His eyes widened in amazement as he saw Stan.

"The kid!" he howled and aimed a lusty blow at Stan with the barrel of his six-shooter. It missed, fortunately, and Rudd did not take the time to repeat. He scooped up the reins of Luke Monroe's horse as that outlaw scrambled to his feet. In a second, both men were tearing down the road, leaving the bags of money lying where they had fallen, and with bullets screaming around them.

Stan was too crestfallen to try to follow. He sat his saddle, staring at the bags in the roadway, while the townsfolk boiled up around him.

He was a hero again.

There was no official reward, but the bank dug down and gave him a hundred dollars for saving the loot. He was furious and embarrassed, but he took it home to his mother, who had never seen so much money in her whole life. She was also a little in awe of her stripling son who had somehow turned into such a wolf among rabbits.

"He's a good boy," she told everyone, marveling herself. "Just as honest as the day is long."

It was thoroughly disgusting. And Stan couldn't put up with it very long. On the third day he packed and departed once more, to trail Monroe and Russ.

THEY LED him a longer chase this time, for a posse or two had taken after them. They had been forced to ride far by moonlight and circle widely, but had shaken off pursuit at last and holed up in the thick piney woods. Stan was gaunt and tired by the time he crept up to the tiny circle of light cast by their sheltered fire.

They were grumpy and sullen as they might well be, after having two prizes snatched from under their noses by a run of bad luck. Stan listened to them grumbling and picking on each other, then he got up and walked into the firelight.

Sheer surprise froze the outlaws' hands.

"It's me," Stan said.

"How'd you get here?"

"Trailed you. I want to ride with you."

"You stupid kid, ain't you given us enough trouble? Why do you keep followin' us?"

"I told you," Stan said patiently. "I want to ride with you. If you'da let me hold your horses out front of the bank this wouldn't have happened. You need me, fellows."

The two outlaws looked at each other and sighed. There must have come to them simultaneously, a vision of themselves riding forever over the horizons, forever pursued by Stan shouting, "I want to ride with you!" They must have seen themselves in the act of lifting some choice cattle, only to have Stan appear, charging down to gum up the whole thing. Or holding up a prize stage, only to have Stan pop out of the brush in time to confuse everyone and give the guards time to unlimber their artillery.

The prospect was a frightening one, enough to turn bolder men than these to cowards.

"Nothin's going to change your mind, eh?" Luke Monroe said softly.

"I want to ride with you," Stan repeated stubbornly.

Both outlaws got to their feet and approached him softly.

Ralph Green paused and sighed. I found no more peaches in the can and waited.

"Well, they didn't kill him," I said, "because I just saw him. What did they do?"

"No they didn't want to kill him," Ralph said. "They weren't completely bad boys. But they sure were tired of him. Next morning when I opened up the store, I found Stan Tobias on the front porch. He was tied up so tight he couldn't even wiggle his ears. He was wrapped in ropes like a mummy. And there was a note on his chest.

"I've lost it," Ralph said, "or Stan got away with it, but I remember what it said. It read, 'We don't know where this kid belongs, or we'd take him there. Just take care of him. We're leaving the country. South America or maybe Africa. Tell him it's no use following us this time.'"

Ralph grinned at me. "So Stan was a hero again. He hadn't captured these outlaws, but he'd sure driven them clean of the country, which was just as good. And when the story came out how he'd trailed them and trailed them and finally scared them off, why folks couldn't do enough for Stan."

"And you gave him a job."

"Yep. I gave him a job." Ralph sighed. "But did you ever see anybody so mad about anything?" ● END

NOTHING TO RUN FROM

from his half sitting position and squeezed off a shot. The bullet thunked dully into the man. He sank to the walk and lay still.

Early got to his feet, feeling the blood running down his side from his wound. The street tilted and righted again. He moved toward the dry goods store.

The doctor came to the door, stared, then hurried to meet Early.

"It's the shoulder," Early said.

The doctor quickly unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it open. He looked at the wound and said, "Went clean through. You're lucky. Come into the store and I'll dress it."

(continued from page 40)

Marin, white-faced, looked from Early to the doctor. The medico said drily, "He'll live, Miss Webster."

Early smiled and let the tension run out. He said, "Thanks, Miss Webster, for everything." His smile broadened. "You can go out onto the street now. The wolf, meanin' Holten, has lost his howl."

"You'll stay in Mercer?" Marin asked.

"Why not?" Early said. "I've got nothin' to run from."

She took his hand and said, "Mercer rests in good hands."

She smiled at him and he thought: And I am in good hands, too. ● END

by ARCHIE JOSCELYN

THE "NEWSBOY" came shuffling through the train, a middle-aged man with sad blue eyes and a limp. It was as much because he felt sorry for him as from a desire for refreshments, that the big man seated next to the window made a purchase.

"I've a nickle in my vest pocket," he informed his companion, who seemed awkwardly tall within the confines of a railroad car. "Get it out, will you, Sam? You got any candy, boy?"

"Nothin' of that sort left but some licorice," the newsboy said apologetically. "It's nice an' fresh, though," he added hopefully. "Cent a stick."

"That'll be fine," the big man said. "Have one, Sam."

He savored his own with slow enjoyment, bobbing his head to bite. "When I was a boy, I thought licorice was about the best thing a fellow could set his teeth into. I'm going to have another. You too, Sam." He gazed pensively out the window at the hot, dry landscape. "Pretty, mighty pretty country. Don't know's I ever noticed it much before, to rightly appreciate it... Put the other stick in my pocket, will you, Sam? Save it for a rainy day."

The train was slowing, the engine puffing and wheezing, cinders blowing back, a gust of murky smoke curling through the car. They alighted, walking close together. There were no other passengers, and the local pulled dispiritedly on to a side track, the engine sighing gently, its run ended.

"We'll wait inside the station," Sam said. "Not quite so hot there, maybe. The Limited ought to be along pretty soon."

"I'm in no hurry, Sam. No hurry at all." The big man smiled companionably. "Ever notice the hollow sound you get, walking on a plank platform like this? Sure tickled me as a boy. Ghostly, like."

They passed inside, to the big, bare waiting room. There was a bench along one wall, painted a dark brown. A stove, its bulges showing almost as rusty as the sagging pipe above, occupied the center of the room, and gave an illusion of throwing out heat.

It was tough for the big man, everybody said, but the sheriff reckoned that, quite on the other hand, the big man's luck was running strong

There was a small table and a couple of chairs, and beyond, the partition where the station agent occupied himself with sundry small chores. The ticking of a telegraph key, which he ignored, sounded monotonously.

"Limited on time?" Sam queried.

The station agent regarded them carefully, these men who walked so close, in such brotherly fashion.

"Late," he said. "Hour and a half behind time. Be about two hours yet."

"Well, I guess we'll have to wait," Sam sighed. "Nothing else to do."

"That's all right. No rush, far's I'm



They were waiting at the station for the Limited.

concerned, Sam." The big man looked about cheerfully. "I remember waitin' in a place about like this with my Ma. I was just a kid—eight or nine. Lot of snow outside that time, though, and the stove was red-hot. There was one feller, kept spittin' tobacco juice against it. I can still hear the way it sizzled. Made little, brown lumps, and they'd sort of dance... Looks like folks had done the same with this one."

"You can't keep a stove clean," the agent spoke querulously. "I've tried."

"Sure, sure. I know. Gives kind of a homey look. Maybe we could have a hand of poker, Sam? You've got some cards, haven't you?"

"Might as well, I guess," Sam agreed, and seated himself, back to the wide-open door. The big man slid creakingly into the chair opposite. Sam hesitated, then carefully placed his revolver in his lap. After that he dealt the cards.

THEY PLAYED awhile in silence, broken by the quick, light tap-tap of a woman's heels. She entered, looking hot and tired, a woman who still retained some of the bloom of youth, whose smile was tender for the fretful child she carried. A little girl of between two and three, bothered by the heat, by unaccustomed journeying.

"Two hours!" the young mother echoed in dismay, after the agent's report. "So long!" She cut short a sigh. "Rosemary, you'll have to try and nap. I'll fix you up over here in the corner, on this nice bench—"

"Don' wanna!" Rosemary's arms went convulsively around her mother's neck, her chubby legs jerked spasmodically. "I don' wanna!" She began to sob.

The men had not risen at the woman's entrance. They looked uncomfortable, Sam's thin face flushed and helpless. The woman strove, without success, to soothe the child. The big man smiled.

"Lady," he suggested, "if you wouldn't mind, I doubt that a bite of candy would upset her. I've a stick of licorice—maybe, if she was to suck it, she'd go off to sleep. It's in my pocket, Sam."

Sam retrieved and tendered it. Rosemary had stopped crying. She

looked at both with a careful regard, and reached slowly to accept the gift, but her quick, bright-eyed smile was for the big man.

"You're very kind," the woman murmured, and placed Rosemary on the bench, against the far wall. Her cloak made a skimpy mattress above the slatted boards, but Rosemary did not seem to mind. It required an effort of will on the woman's part not to look back. She had seen the gun lying in Sam's lap, and now she understood why the big man handled his cards so laboriously. Because of the handcuffs.

Save for the far-away chattering of the telegraph key, the soft slither of the pasteboards, there was no sound. The child's even breathing told that she was asleep. Brushing back loose strands of hair from her damp forehead, the mother went outside. The sun was hot, but at least there was a breath of air beyond the open door.

A couple of times she returned to look in, once when a horseman swung along the road, leaving a small trail of dust, and stopped clatteringly on the plank platform, just in front of the station. His cayuse was skittish, plainly disliking the sound of iron-shod hoofs on the planks, but the rider dropped the reins with a laugh.

The station agent stepped outside, frowning disapproval.

"This platform's for people," he said. "Horses belong off it."

"He's all right," the rider said carelessly. "I'll get him pretty soon." He moved along to the cool-looking recesses of the freight house and disappeared.

ANOTHER man tramped in, boots clomping, plainly an Easterner. He inquired as to the train, and complained at the delay in the heat. The agent shrugged and studiously bent lower above his desk.

The newcomer stared a moment at the two players, as if wondering whether or not to ask to be allowed to take a hand, and decided against it. He crossed to the doorway and stood, filling it, blocking off the slight breeze, muttering.

"The West!" he growled. "The wild, woolly West! Bah! I've traveled a thousand miles through this godfor-

saken country, and it's about half as exciting as a Sunday afternoon at Aunty Pritchett's on Cherry Street! Badmen! Bah!"

The sleeping child stirred, her face licorice-smudged. The big man raised a mildly reproving voice.

"Baby's trying to sleep, Mister," he said.

The dude glowered a moment, but went on out, into the sun. Far off, a locomotive whistled. The agent shook his head without looking up.

"Just a helper engine, comin' back."

The locomotive came lumbering down the track, gently wheezing. It moved almost in silence until it was in front of the station. There could have been no reason for the sudden display, save that possibly the engineer was hot and bored with the easy placidity of the day, suffering a sudden impulse to stir things up, to announce his arrival. Without warning the whistle gave a thunderous blast.

The forgotten cayuse had ceased to prance. It stood, head drooping, half asleep. The high screech of the whistle brought it wide awake as it did every other living thing within the radius of a mile; but to the horse this was a strange place and eerie, and the metal monster was particularly terrifying. The cayuse squealed and pivoted, and the open door of the station seemed the nearest thing to a sheltering barn. It burst through and in like the whip of a tornado.

Sam, seated with his back to the door, was caught off-guard. The agent, beyond the partition, could only stare in horror. It remained for the big man to act. He took in the situation as the cayuse erupted through the door, and acted with surprising speed for so big a man. His chair hit the floor with a crash as he shoved

upright, then a jump carried him past the stove and in front of the child, just stirring on the bench at the sudden tumult.

The dragging reins slowed the horse somewhat, but it was still plunging wildly ahead. The big man jumped and caught the bridle, close up to the bit, hampered somewhat by the manacles on his wrists, but getting a good grip. The horse reared, lashing out with both front hoofs.

Sam was up and running, and the agent came, clearing the partition in a jump, not pausing for his small gate. The dude showed courage by darting in to assist as well, and the owner of the horse was not far behind.

They dragged it back and away, while Rosemary was swept into her mother's arms. The rush of the mad-dened cayuse had been stopped just short of the bench. The big man, having got his grip, had clung firmly, throwing all his weight into the effort.

It had been enough, but one smashing hoof had dealt a pile-driver blow. He lay now, sprawled, unmoving. Sam knelt beside him, before slowly raising up, shaking his head. Little Rosemary began to sob. Or perhaps it was the young mother.

Awed, the man from the East had finally noticed the handcuffs, the gun. Disregarding the recriminations which the agent was heaping on the horseman, he stared down.

"That was as fine a thing as I ever saw," he paid tribute. "Too bad his luck had to run out."

Sam blinked, wiping his face with a blue bandana. "My guess is, on the other hand, he'd have said his luck was runnin' strong," the sheriff husked. "You see, he was to be hanged tomorrow." ● END

THE OLD WEST'S FIRST ONE

He expected to be hanged immediately, but they allowed him to write a letter to his friend Mrs. Hood and one to his mother; to have a drink of whiskey; to make some remarks about his past life; and to start praying.

The noose stopped him in the middle of his prayer. The sheriff arrived ten minutes later.

Rumors abounded that Tom Bell had not really been hanged at all, and

(cont'd from page 16)

exactly a month later a deputy sheriff led a posse to a cabin where Bell was supposed to be hiding. The posse split up into two parties. One party heard sounds (of the other party, it turned out) and challenged. Rifle shots came out of the brush. They fired back. The deputy was killed in the mix-up and one of his aides wounded. Bell's body was in the ground, but his influence still lingered on. ● END

HE'D HAD A TOUGH LIFE

RED BURKE, who hadn't been seen or heard of in over a year, was back. He was over at Seamon's roadhouse. There were two men with him. According to Eddie Lee, they had plenty of money to spend. Eddie had been running errands for

"You'd think it was some kind of privilege, the way he acts," Carlson, the livery stable owner, told Brundage, who had just arrived in town after two weeks of steady work on his small ranch.

"That crazy kid," Brundage said,

Brundage hadn't expected any trouble from Red, not the shooting kind anyhow.



by
J. L.
BOUMA

How much could a man do to help a fool youngster? Because Eddie Lee plainly could no more cut the mustard as an honest, decent citizen than he had as an outlaw

them, buying in town what things they wanted that Seamon didn't carry in stock, and he was pretty cocky about the whole business.

and rubbed his shoulder with the tips of his fingers. It didn't ache any longer, but he could feel the hollow scar where the bullet had entered. He dropped his hand, irritated at the involuntary gesture. He supposed hearing about Red Burke had made him do it. The devil with Red, he told himself.

"Eddie oughta know better," he said.

"No sense at all," Carlson said.

"He might do all right, given a chance."

"Maybe."

Brundage grunted. From where he stood in the mouth of the stable he could look beyond Provo's short wide street and see the big boulders on either side of the road. They were painted white and marked the boundary of Wilkinson County. Seamon's roadhouse stood about a quarter of a mile on the other side, in Douglas County.

Seamon, who was friendly to anyone that had money to spend, had put up two big corrals, and he always had extra horses on hand. There was a long bunkhouse where a man could hole up for a price. Seamon kept just about everything a man needed, including women.

Though Seamon's place was a sore spot in that country, he had things pretty well under control. He was well situated, for the greater percentage of Douglas County's inhabitants lived beyond the arid wilderness that rose at his back door, and the law rarely bothered him.

"How long has Red been back?" Brundage asked.

"Two days," the stable owner said, and grinned. "I wonder what old Beal would do if Red ever took it into his head to come over here and start trouble?"

Brundage shrugged. Bruce Beal was the town marshal, but he wasn't old by any means. No older than Brundage, who had been marshal up to a year ago, and that made him twenty-six. But Beal was a kind of chronic complainer, and it made men refer to him as "old Beal."

"Well, I'll see you," Brundage said. "I won't be leaving till sometime late tomorrow."

"Amelia is helping her Pa at the store," Carlson grinned. "When's the big day, Steve?"

"Last Sunday this month. A June wedding."

"I'll be there with bells on," Carlson said, and led Brundage's horse to a stall.

BRUNDAGE moved slowly along the street, feeling the hot New Mexico sun burn through his shirt. He turned into Jay Shepley's big emporium and saw Amelia behind the counter in the woman's section, show-

ing bolts of calico to Mrs. Parker, the blacksmith's wife. Amelia looked up and smiled at him, and he noticed that her eyes were troubled. He supposed she was thinking about Red Burke, unable to keep from worrying because of what had happened over a year ago. That was a woman for you.

"Hello, Steve," her father said, passing Brundage by the doorway. "I got in some blocks of salt, if you need any."

"I can use a dozen."

"How's everything out at your place?"

"Fine. I got my wild hay cut last week. Be enough to last me through the winter, I reckon. I hear Red's back."

"Yeah," Shepley said, as though it were better forgotten.

"Well, I guess I'll go over and get me a drink. Tell Amelia I'll be back directly."

Shepley said, "Don't get mixed up in this business, Steve. If Eddie wants to make a damfool outa himself, let him."

"Like Red, huh?"

"You know what I mean," Shepley said. "Eddie ain't no kid—he's seventeen. That's old enough to know black from white."

"I guess so," Brundage allowed.

Shepley went to wait on a customer and Brundage sauntered outside and tugged at the brim of his hat. He rolled a cigarette with deft fingers and struck a match and pulled the smoke down. He blew it out of his nostrils. The street was pretty well crowded with rigs and riders, for this was Saturday when most of the outlying ranchers and homesteaders came in to shop.

Customers entered the sprawling store and kept Shepley and his clerks hopping. Lubell's Saloon, across on the corner, was doing a brisk business. An average Saturday in a town where nothing much out of the ordinary ever happened. And yet the reek of trouble reached Brundage and disturbed him.

Foolishness, he thought. Whatever happened was not his responsibility. Not any more in this town; not since he had stopped a bullet that had laid him up for a month, and the city fa-

thers had hired Beal to replace him. Well, it had been time for him to turn in his badge, and it had made Amelia happy. Making her happy meant just about everything, Brundage decided.

He sauntered away from the store, remembering that it had taken him a long time to put Red Burke out of his mind. In an odd way he had felt himself a failure, for he had often tried to lend Red a hand over the rough spots, and had failed. Hang it! Red had been a wise show-off who figured himself one step behind Billy the Kid, and he had never listened to reason. He'd been in and out of trouble continually, and finally something happened that told Brundage he couldn't shield Red any longer.

That was when Red had waylaid and robbed old man Stewart of eighteen dollars. Stewart had been on his way home from his daily poker game and Red had knocked him out with the barrel of his gun. Brundage felt down in the dumps when he heard about it. He found Red in a saloon, and Red denied robbing the old man. Brundage guessed that Red thought he hadn't been identified in all that darkness, which just went to show how foolish he had been.

When Brundage had told him to come along to jail, Red had laughed and tried to talk his way out of it. Finally he'd turned nasty. Brundage hadn't expected any real trouble—not the shooting kind, anyhow. But when he reached for Red to take him by force, Red pulled a gun and shot him.

RED HAD made a run for it and disappeared, and the Lord only knew what he'd been up to since. If a man wanted to believe rumors, it was plenty. Brundage had been a law officer too long to believe in rumors himself, but still you could never tell. When someone like Red turned up with money to spend, it made a man wonder where he got it.

Sauntering along the hot street, Brundage knew that he himself still carried a grudge. It wasn't easy to forgive and forget a broken shoulder and weeks of pain. Not that he meant to do anything about it, of course. If he happened to run into Red he would just ignore the man. There was nothing else he could do.

All he hoped right now was that Eddie Lee wouldn't follow in Red's footsteps, and he knew better than anyone that the possibility was there. For Eddie'd had a tough life, what with his old man ending up in the pen. Brundage had hired Eddie during roundup that spring, and though the boy proved himself a willing worker, he was far from being a top hand. Not needing another rider after roundup, Brundage let him go, and since then Eddie had been working at odd jobs around the country, which was fine. But running errands for the hardcases who laid up at Seamon's, wasn't.

There were several horses at the tie rail in front of the saloon. One of them—an old gray crowbait—belonged to Eddie. Brundage went inside and lounged up to the bar, and several men spoke to him. Their eyes, he noticed, lingered longer than they should have, as though they were curious about how he was taking the news of Red's return.

Lubell came and Brundage said, "Give me a beer." Lubell drew it from the barrel on the wooden trestle, scooped foam from the glass with a knife and added a little more beer. self-important idler, who turned his

Brundage drank off half the glass and sighed. He wiped foam from his lips and looked around. Eddie Lee met his gaze from farther down along the bar, gave a short nod and looked away. He was standing with Bellew, a red face and said in a loud voice, "Hear about your playmate coming back?"

"What about it?" Brundage said.

Bellew grinned. "We was just talking about the time he shot you."

Brundage met Eddie's gaze again, and Eddie flushed. There was a sullenly tough expression around his mouth that didn't fool Brundage, who had known a number of seventeen-year-olds that had earned the right to call themselves men. Eddie was not one of them, and he had a long ways to go. Maybe he would never make it. He held Brundage's steady stare for a second and then jerked his eyes away as if he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't have done.

HE REACHED in his pocket and slapped a gold coin on the counter. "I'm buying the house, Lubell!" There was a whiskey flush on his cheeks and his eyes were suddenly bright with recklessness as he looked at Brundage again. "That beer's on me, Steve."

"Thanks," Brundage said dryly.

Lubell said, "Eddie's buying, boys. Belly up," and men moved to the bar with good-natured words of thanks.

Bellew said, "Red's doing all right by you, kid. How is he, anyhow?"

"Red knows what he's doing," Eddie said. "He's right up there handling the reins."

Brundage couldn't help but say, "For better or worse?" and he saw resentment crowd Eddie's eyes.

"Red's smart," Eddie said, making it sound important. "He ain't killing himself for no forty a month and found. Him and his partners know what they're doing."

"Who are they, kid?" Bellew asked.

"Osborne and Sackett," Eddie said.

"Where'd they get their money?" Bellew prodded, and winked at Brundage. "They sure struck it rich somewhere along the line."

"They been mustanging," Eddie said. He noticed that all the men along the bar were watching him, and he flushed and added inconclusively, "That's what Red told me, anyhow."

The kid didn't quite believe it himself, Brundage thought. He turned his head as the batwings swung and saw Bruce Beal step inside and look around. The marshal came up to him and said, "You hear about Red being back?" Brundage nodded. "Well, I just hope he stays on the other side of the line," Beal said. He was a pudgy young man with pink cheeks and mild blue eyes. "I don't want any trouble with him and his bunch."

Brundage shrugged. It was like Beal to worry before anything happened. "No reason why he can't come and go as he pleases," Brundage said, and sauntered outside.

It was getting along in the afternoon, and Shepley was doing a rushing business. Brundage took time to inspect a new saddle, and after a while Amelia touched his arm and

said, "Let's go, Steve. I'm going home and start supper."

The Shepley's house was on Elk Street. As they went inside, Amelia said, "What happened at the saloon?"

"Not a thing out of the ordinary."

"Was Eddie there?"

"He was there," Brundage said.

He sat at the kitchen table and watched Amelia tie an apron around her waist. She was a robust girl with blonde hair and a figure like an hourglass, and Brundage was crazy about her. He said, "Come here—" and reached over to pull her on his lap.

"Don't," she said, but not as if she meant it. "I have to put the roast in the oven."

"I'll put you in the oven," Brundage murmured. He held her close and kissed her; he put his lips against her throat, and her fingers fastened in his hair. She pulled his head back and moved her mouth against his before kissing him fiercely, her breasts hard against his chest.

"Good Lord," he breathed. "You'd better get away from me, else that roast never will see the oven."

She grasped his ears, her eyes shiny and triumphant. "I know what I do to you and I'm glad," she said.

SHE ROSE and straightened her apron and fluffed her hair and turned to the cooler. "What did Eddie have to say?"

"That kid!" Brundage said angrily. "He was buying drinks for the house." He scowled at the window. "I should've talked to him."

"Better leave well enough alone."

"Well enough?" Brundage said.

"Judas, he doesn't realize what he's doing." He paused again, irritated and restless. "If Red and those boys were on the up-and-up they'd be here in town, not over at Seamon's place. I'll bet my saddle they pulled a job somewhere and are laying low for a spell."

"Well, there's nothing you can do about it," Amelia said, washing the roast and putting it in a pan.

"I don't aim to do anything," Brundage said, reaching for his tobacco. "It's just that I hate to see Eddie get mixed up with them."

"Just don't you get mixed up with

Red," said Amelia. "What I think I'll do is keep you right here until you're ready to go back to the ranch tomorrow."

"I wouldn't mind," Brundage grinned. "We can give your Pa a couple dollars and tell him to go have a night on the town."

"Darn you," she said, but he saw that she was pleased.

She made him two cheese sandwiches and coffee to keep his strength up, she said. They spoke of their coming marriage. Brundage rose finally and stretched his arms. "I'm almost outa tobacco. You want me to bring anything back from the store?"

"Just bring yourself," Amelia said sharply, and looked at him. "No nonsense, hear me?"

She was half joking, but only half. Brundage said, "No nonsense, ma'am," and went out.

The sun was down and there was a ruddy glow over the land as Brundage turned on the main street. There was a scowl on his face, for Eddie Lee was still strong in his mind, and he didn't like it. Why should he worry about the fool kid? What if Eddie did turn bad? Most kids had to face the right or the wrong of a thing during their lives; it was part of growing up. And if they took the wrong road it was their own fault. Or was it? The thought was disconcerting.

There were only two or three customers in the store, and a clerk was lighting the overhead lamps. Brundage bought a sack of tobacco and a handful of cigars, and stood in the doorway rolling a cigarette. He noticed that Eddie's gray was no longer tied at the hitch rack.

Shepley came and they palavered for a while. Dusk settled over the town. Shepley said he would be closing up soon and went back into the store; and Brundage was still standing there a few minutes later when Eddie Lee rode in from the direction of Seamon's and tied up out front.

He ducked under the rail and saw Brundage and started past him, but Brundage's voice stopped him. "Eddie, I wouldn't fool with those boys if I were you."

Eddie swung around, his eyes faint-

ly sullen. He said, "Why don't you try minding your own business?"

It stung Brundage, for a week ago Eddie wouldn't have said that. It just went to show how far wrong he had already gone.

"I'm fixing to put up some new fence next week, and figured I could use you." It was true about the fence, but not about figuring to hire Eddie. Brundage felt a little disgusted with himself, standing there and offering the kid work when he could handle the job alone. But it had been said now, and he would stick by it.

Eddie hesitated as if breasting a barrier that he couldn't quite make out. He was frowning, and indecision tumbled in his eyes. "I keep pretty busy," he said finally, and went on into the store.

BRUNDAGE waited until Eddie came outside again carrying a paper sack. Brundage said, "You could get in trouble fooling with men like Red Burke."

"What's the matter?" Eddie flashed. "You afraid of him?"

Brundage tried again. "Don't make the mistake of looking up to him, Eddie."

"Why not?" Eddie took a handful of silver from his pocket. "Two weeks of your wages to run a few errands. What more do you want?"

"It never lasts. Men like Red could steal a thousand and live high for a week and not have enough for a meal the following week. You want to help me fix fence?"

Eddie laughed and climbed on his horse. He said, "Some other time," and rode on up the street.

The devil with it, Brundage thought, and turned back to Shepley's house. He had failed with Red Burke and maybe he had failed with Eddie Lee, but at least he had tried. The thought did nothing to comfort him; it did nothing to ease his mind.

At ten past eight he sat in Shepley's parlor and thumbed through a copy of a Taos newspaper; and at twenty past Amelia looked in from the kitchen and said, "Dinner's ready and no Dad. I wonder what's keeping him?"

Brundage put the paper away and opened the door and looked out, the sensations of trouble chopping at him through the early darkness. He said, "I'll hurry him along," and stepped back to get his hat.

"No stopping at the saloon," Amelia said. "The roast is done to a turn, and I don't want it spoiled."

Before Brundage reached the store he saw that it was in darkness except for the small overhead lamp Shepley burned nights at the rear. He tried the door; he looked along the street to Lubell's and headed that way. To Lubell he said, "Jay been in?" and Lubell shook his head.

"Not tonight, Steve."

"Ernie?" He looked around and saw Marshal Beal at a table.

"Not since this afternoon."

Brundage went out and hiked around the alley to the store's back door. It opened under his hand. He said, "Jay!" and came up under the lamp and looked around; he saw Shepley's desk in the corner, and the safe next to it, its door open. And he saw the trussed figure in the shadows against the baseboard.

It was Shepley. Brundage cut him loose and took a gag from his mouth. Shepley sat up and swore and explored the bloody lump on the side of his head with sensitive fingers. "Oh, damn," he said.

H E'D CLOSED up and was counting the day's take, he told Brundage, when someone rapped on the door. "He looked like a cowpuncher in need of something or other, so I opened up for him, and he put a gun on me and forced me back here. Then he slugged me with the gun, but not so hard that I didn't know what was going on. He opened the back door and let a couple of his friends in, and they helped themselves to the money and a couple of guns, if I'm not mistaken."

"Who were they, did you see?"

Shepley hadn't. "They tied me up before they left, and I was pretty foggy. But one voice sure sounded like Red Burke's." He stood and leaned against the desk. "Get Beal. I want something done about this." He swore with relish.

"How much did they get?"

"Close to a thousand. A couple of ranchers settled their accounts today, and what with the rest we took in, it ran close to a thousand dollars."

"Beal's over at Lubell's. I'll get him, but I don't know as he'll do you much good."

Beal was still in the saloon. He got up and came over at Brundage's gesture, and followed him outside. "What's up?"

Brundage told him as they hurried back to the store, and Beal remained strangely silent. He listened again as Shepley told what had happened, and he said in a half-skeptical, half-worried tone, "You sure it was Red Burke you heard?"

"Hell, I've heard that raspy voice of his often enough," Shepley said angrily. "Three of 'em. I'll bet right now they're laughing about it over at Seamon's. What're you gonna do about it, Beal?"

"Make out a report and send it to the Douglas County sheriff, I reckon."

Shepley snorted. "*Make out a report!* What the hell's wrong with going over there and arresting 'em and bringing 'em back here?"

"Seamon's ain't in my jurisdiction."

"Well, ain't that too bad!" Shepley said sarcastically. "Steve here crossed the line more than once to pick up a man when he was marshal."

"Wasn't supposed to."

"The hell with that!"

"When did you see Eddie last?" Brundage asked Beal, and the marshal blinked at him.

"Seen him just about dark. He had his warbag—" Beal stared at Brundage. "You think maybe he tipped 'em off?"

Brundage didn't say because he wasn't sure, but he had the same down-in-the-dumps feeling he'd had when Red Burke slugged Stewart for his eighteen dollars.

"I had the feeling something would happen," Beal complained.

"You got feelings all right, and they're all for yourself," Shepley said contemptuously. "Are you going after 'em or not?"

"I got no business going over there, Jay."

Jay Shepley swore. He opened a drawer and took out a gun and pushed it under his belt. "By Judas, then I'll go myself."

"Take it easy," Brundage said. "The only place you're going by yourself is home."

Shepley exploded. "What the hell are you, my father? Get outa my way!"

Brundage took hold of the older man's arm, hoping he wouldn't have to get rough. While Shepley struggled and cursed, Brundage heard the door open and saw Amelia come inside.

THE SIGHT of his daughter took the fight out of Shepley. He shook his arm from Brundage's grip and sank down in his chair. "Somebody is a damfool around here," he muttered. "What's going on?" Amelia said.

Beal started to explain as if relieved at the interruption. Brundage took the gun from Shepley and pushed it inside his shirt. Eddie had packed his gear with the hope of joining Red's muster, he told himself while anger swirled in him. This was Eddie's answer. How much more could a man do to help a fool kid? If Red took him on, Eddie was done for; he could no more cut the mustard as an outlaw than as a free and decent man. Even less, and Red would know that. Maybe it pleased Red to guide the kid along the wrong trail. Maybe that was it.

"And what do you think you're doing with that gun?" Amelia demanded. He had to hand it to her; she had kept an eye on him all during the time she was listening to Beal.

"The devil with it, Steve," Shepley said wearily. "What's a thousand dollars anyway."

"Plenty," Brundage said, but that wasn't at all what he meant. He was thinking that if he didn't go he wouldn't be the loser, either. He wasn't packing a star, and what happened in this town was not his responsibility. But Judas!

He started for the back door and

had it open when Amelia called, "Steve!" and came after him. "Where do you think you're going?"

Brundage shook her off and started up the alley at a fast pace. If Red and his bunch were still at Seamon's they would be looking out for a rider, for no self-respecting cowman would walk any distance when he could fork a horse. It wasn't too far, even in high-heeled boots. Brundage circled away from the road and came out on a little rise and saw the lights of Seamon's place below him.

He slipped past the corrals and the dark bunkhouse and approached the two-story clapboard house from the rear. Light shone from two of the upstairs windows, where Seamon's girls stayed. The rear door opened into the kitchen; there was a long hallway, with stairs on one side. The hallway ended at the big front room where Seamon had his bar, and where he served meals.

The sound of voices and laughter met Brundage as he moved forward in the shadows against the wall. He took the gun from inside his shirt and pushed the barrel under his belt. Red Burke said something, his voice a confident jeer, and then Seamon spoke in the heavy way of a fat man, saying, "I don't like it. You know my rules. No rough stuff in Provo. Leave them alone and they'll leave me alone. Make trouble there and you put me on the spot."

Brundage looked into the room. Red Burke, lithe and restless, faced Seamon across the bar. Two dark strangers sat drinking at a table with a red-haired woman, and Eddie Lee, an uncertain grin on his soft boyish face, sat alone in a corner like a wet hen in the rain.

"You're getting paid," Red was saying. "Anyhow, we'll be moving on before long."

Seamon grunted. He turned to reach for a bottle and grunted a second time when he saw Brundage in the doorway. "Looks like I'm on that spot," he said tonelessly. "Hello, Steve."

The words spun Red and his hand slapped his holstered gun. "Well, if it ain't the ex-marshal," he said. "What the hell you doing here?"

"Came to take you and your boys into Provo," Brundage said.

Red laughed. "You?"

Brundage said, "You boys join Red. Put your guns on the bar, or make your play. You, woman, get outside."

The woman rose and hesitated. Then she made a beeline for the door and disappeared.

Red Burke murmured, "Stay right there, boys. I busted his shoulder once, but I'll do better this time."

RED WAS no longer a kid and he was all bad. Brundage saw it in the snarl that twisted the lean face as the other's hand flashed to his gun. Brundage snapped his own gun from under his belt and twisted his body sideways as he fired at the slim figure before him. The sound of that shot exploded against the walls, and the crash still echoed when Eddie Lee screamed, "Don't—watch it, Steve!" and fired the gun he'd plucked from his holster. Red had slumped to the floor and Eddie's shot had missed the two outlaws at the table. Seamon, knowing which side his bread was buttered on, slapped a sawed-off shotgun on the bar and said, "Put those guns down, boys!"

They had their guns fisted, but the sight of the shotgun changed their minds about using them. Their guns clattered to the floor. One of the men said, "I thought this place was supposed to be safe."

"You knew the rules and you broke them," Seamon said, and came around the bar to look at Red. "Dead as a doornail," was his comment.

"Where's the money you stole from Shepley?" Brundage demanded.

They had already split three ways. Seamon collected it and put it in a bag, which Brundage pushed inside his shirt. He glanced at Eddie and saw that the boy's face was ripped by shock. He kicked the door open and motioned with his gun.

"Breeze outa the country," he told the two men. "We don't want you in our jail. But show your faces around Provo again and you'll end up in Boot hill."

They scrambled out the door and ran to the corrals. Brundage turned

to Eddie. "Go ahead with 'em. No one's stopping you. Go ahead, dammit! That's been your idea, hasn't it?"

The boy's mouth worked. "I don't want to go."

"Then stay here, but keep away from me."

"Steve, I didn't think—"

"Shut up!" Brundage said, and the words scalded. "Take a good look at Red and shut up! I tried to help him one time, now look at him. Do you think anyone cares? And do you think anyone will care when you end up the same way?"

In a low shaky voice Eddie said, "I'd—like to work for you, Steve."

Seamon laughed and Brundage turned on him.

"You're through here, Seamon, so help me. I want you outa here by Monday, and I'm not funning."

"You ain't got no right—" Seamon began hoarsely.

"Monday," Brundage repeated, and went out and strode toward town. Eddie followed leading his horse.

When he had crossed the county line, Brundage stopped. "All right, boy, I'm giving you a chance. Ride out to my place and in the morning do the chores."

"Steve, I want to thank—"

"We'll see how it works out. If it doesn't, you'll be on your way. Now get going."

"Fair enough," Eddie Lee said in a shaky voice. He climbed on his horse and rode away.

Brundage walked on. He was even with the saloon when Amelia ran to meet him. "Steve, are you all right?"

"Sure."

"You, you, you," she breathed, clinging to his arm. "You never say what you mean to do and then you don't explain when it's over. What am I supposed to think?"

"Just keep loving me. We'll straighten out the rest of it as we go along. You follow me?"

"I follow you, honey," Amelia said. "And I'll keep following you as long as I'm able."

Brundage grinned. That, he told himself, was about all a man could ask of a woman.

● END

FOUR IN TOWN

by WILLIAM RICHARDS

Taming the local waddies on a bender was sure a far cry from bracing a quartet of professional gunslingers

D EPUTY SHERIFF Tom Campbell stood in the shade of the hotel veranda and watched the two men riding slowly up the center of the empty, sun-baked street. It was the second pair that had ridden into Prescott that day, hard-eyed, stubble-jawed men, each of them wearing two pistols tied low on travel-stained levis.

The two glanced over at Campbell as they passed the hotel, and he racked his mind as he mentally shuffled through the pile of dodgers on wanted men in his office. He couldn't place them, but he knew as surely as if they'd told him that each of the four had ridden long on dim and twisted backtrails before gathering in Pres-

cott that sun-scorched August noon.

Campbell watched them go into the Ace High Saloon in the next block where the first pair had gone and then came down off the veranda and went the other way to his office in front of the jail. He paused briefly at the hitch rail out front to scratch his horse between the ears, glanced back at the Ace High and went into the office.

He took out a ring of keys and opened the gun locker on the wall. As he took down a Winchester, he felt his strongest doubts yet at having accepted the badge. Such doubts had plagued him from the beginning, ever since his friends had put him up for office despite his protests that no one



The two men were racing towards their horses.

with a stiff shoulder should be given responsibility for maintaining order.

He'd won the election, though, and he'd pinned on the badge, but the doubts persisted. Nothing had happened in the past nine months that he hadn't been able to cope with, but bedding down local waddies with too much whiskey in them was a far cry from bracing a quartet of professional gunslingers.

Campbell glanced up at the clock. He was outnumbered four to one, but Sheriff Johnny Robertson would be coming back any minute now from a little ride he'd taken into the hills with his sister, and that would bring the odds more nearly into line. Campbell knew he could always line up a posse, but he wanted to wait until he knew which way these four would jump. There was always the possibility they might just be passing through. He didn't want people to think he had to run for help every time a hard-looking customer rode into town.

The sound of footsteps on the boardwalk outside brought him to the office door. As he saw the sheriff's sister Anne walking toward him with Franklin Harrison, the old fruitless longing for the unattainable hardened in his throat. He stepped out onto the boardwalk and touched his hatbrim as the slender, dark-haired girl stopped beside him.

"Hello, Ann," he said. "You're back early."

"Yes," she said. "Franklin was coming to dinner today, so I rode on ahead."

"Oh," Campbell said. Disappointment tightened in his chest as he nodded coolly to Harrison. "Howdy, Frank."

Harrison, a stocky, blond, curly-headed man in boiled shirt and string tie, was equally distant. "Hello, Campbell." He turned to Anne and took off his hat. "I have a lot of things to clean up at the bank, Anne, so I'll have to be off. It was a wonderful dinner, and I hope you and Johnny will dine with me one day soon."

Anne smiled. "Thank you, Franklin. Perhaps we can."

HARRISON put on his hat, nodded once more at Campbell and

walked on down the boardwalk toward the center of town.

"I suppose," Campbell said, "he told you all the latest gossip from Kansas City."

Anne was noncommittal. "He said his work kept him very busy."

"Not busy enough to suit me," Campbell said. He smiled unhappily and changed the subject. "Johnny didn't come back with you?"

"No. He stopped off at the Circle X to see Luke Johnson."

"When'll he be back?"

"He said he might stay out there another hour. He wasn't sure." Anne frowned. "Is anything wrong, Tom?"

Campbell shook his head. "No. It's just that I was supposed to go out along Silver Creek today."

"I know," Anne said. "Johnny said to tell you to go ahead, if everything's all right here." She looked up and down the quiet, sun-baked street and laughed. "And it looks as if everything's all right here."

"Sleeping like a baby."

"Well," Anne said, "I guess I'd better get on home. I have a sink full of dishes waiting for me." She paused. "Mother was asking about you the other day. She says she never sees you any more. Why don't you come over tonight? We might have some cold tea and cookies. It'd be like old times when we were kids."

Campbell smiled. "No one can beat your mother's cookies."

"Then I—we'll be looking for you."

Campbell watched Anne walk back up the street and returned her final smiling wave as she turned the corner toward her house. His eyes misted. Anne Robertson had been in his dreams as long as he could remember, and for a while he had dared hope they might be coming true—before he suffered his stiff shoulder and Franklin Harrison. But enough of that. He had a job to do.

He looked back at the Ace High Saloon and the four horses hitched to the rail out front. Everything might look all right to Anne, he thought, but it seemed to him as if the air was brittle with the tension of gunplay about to break loose.

He'd have to go into it by himself, now that Johnny Robertson wouldn't

be back. He should have mentioned something about it when Harrison had been there. Harrison might have pleaded tiredness after just getting back from Kansas City, but he probably would have been obliged to offer his assistance, especially in front of Anne.

Campbell would have liked nothing better than to take him up on it. He hadn't liked Harrison since their school days when Harrison, a few years older, had monopolized all of Anne's time. Later, when Harrison's father had sent him back East to college, Campbell had seen more of Anne and he'd let his hopes rise that she was beginning to care. But Harrison's father had died a few months ago and Harrison had come back to take over the reins of the family bank.

ALMOST immediately he had begun courting Anne again, and no one could blame her for welcoming his attentions. Harrison was a handsome, polished man. His father, the only banker in town, had occupied an important place in civic affairs, and Harrison was apparently already a more able man than his father had been. And his dinners were more sumptuous, his clothes finer, his buggies fancier, and his teams smarter. Campbell knew he could never provide as fine a life for Anne as Harrison could.

But as much as he disliked the man, Campbell knew he couldn't allow Harrison to take a hand against the four at the Ace High. Harrison could barely hold a pistol, let alone shoot one, and taking him into a gunfight would be committing murder, for Harrison wouldn't last a split second.

Campbell smiled wryly. He probably wouldn't last much longer himself. Since the day an outlaw bronc had smashed him against the corral and his broken left shoulder had mended wrong and forced him to give up ranching and become a sheriff, he'd constantly practiced his draw and his aim. He'd got to be pretty good at it by now and had even earned a minor reputation in the neighboring country. But a reputation wouldn't help much, Campbell thought, because men who lived by their guns, like the four at the Ace High, were gifted with

a natural speed and eye that no amount of practice could equal. Besides, the odds were four to one.

Campbell went into the office and picked up his rifle. He levered a shell into the chamber and eased the hammer down. He stood there well back from the window for some minutes staring out at the Ace High.

Suddenly Campbell started as the four men came out of the saloon and mounted their horses. They glanced briefly up and down the street and rode at a walk toward the other end of town. Campbell moved closer to the window to keep them in sight and saw them stop at the far corner of the next block. They talked a few moments and then two of the men rode around the corner out of Campbell's line of vision. The other two stayed where they were.

Campbell frowned. Harrison's bank was just this side of that corner, and it wasn't hard to tell what was happening. The gang had learned of the noon-time schedule Harrison observed and knew that after the mid-day rush of banking Harrison's two tellers went to eat while Harrison stayed there alone with the safe locked in the lull that followed.

HARRISON had been on his way back to the bank when he'd come by with Anne, and any minute now his two tellers would come out for their dinner. When they did, the gang would step inside, scare Harrison into opening the safe and clean it out without having to fire a shot.

That would clean out Harrison, too, Campbell thought. It would bankrupt him and he'd have to close up the bank. He'd then be out on the street like anybody else. The humiliation of his sudden social decline would probably make him leave town—and Anne.

Campbell pursed his lips. All he had to do was stay clear of things for a while, and he had a perfect excuse to do that. Johnny Robertson and Anne would both support his story that he had been ordered to go out along Silver Creek this afternoon. If he hadn't seen them himself, there would have been no reason for him to think a quartet of bank robbers was in town. No one had come and told

him about the four. No, it was perfect.

Campbell went out, locked the office and mounted his horse. He stuck the rifle into his saddle scabbard, reined around and started up the street toward the open range and Silver Creek.

The sun was still high, but the dinner-time break was about over and the town was coming to life. A few women in sunbonnets were moving from store to store with shopping baskets on their arms and stopping to gossip with one another.

It was a good town, Campbell thought. He had grown up and gone to school here. He knew everyone by name. Ranchers and cowboys in the surrounding country were his friends, men who would back him with their lives if he asked, and whom he would back at the slightest trouble.

For a brief instant, panic fluttered in Campbell's chest as he suddenly realized it wasn't only Harrison's money. It was everybody's money, the whole town's money. If the bank were robbed, Harrison would go down, all right, but everybody else would go down with him. Savings would be wiped out, ranchers ruined, friends and neighbors left suddenly destitute.

Campbell turned into a side street and reined up, hands sweaty and heart pounding. He'd almost destroyed the whole town. His town...

There was only one thing to do. It meant saving Harrison. It meant giving up Anne. But it had to be done. There wouldn't even be time to get up a posse. Campbell inhaled deeply and blew out his breath in a gusty sigh. He'd have to take on the four outlaws by himself.

HE SPURRED his horse down the narrow alley behind the stores to the rear of the bank. A small stable used by Harrison to keep his team during the day stood there, and Campbell dismounted and headed for its wide-open door. Two saddled horses stood just inside. The outlaw's horses, Campbell guessed. When the four had separated, two had come around to the back. As Campbell was about to duck inside the stable, Harrison stepped out in front of him, a pistol in his hand. Campbell quickly knocked it to the ground.

"Put that away," he said sharply. "It's me."

Harrison nodded dully, his face pale and wet with perspiration.

"Snap out of it," Campbell said. "Where are they? Inside?"

Again Harrison nodded.

Campbell thrust the rifle into Harrison's hands. "Take this and cover me. I'm going in after them."

Harrison took the rifle and cocked it. Campbell drew his pistol, hurried through the stable and out the small front door. Keeping close to a board fence at the side of the yard, he raced in a crouch toward the back door of the bank a hundred feet away. Behind him Harrison blasted away with the rifle.

A sudden blow from behind struck Campbell high in his bad shoulder and drove him stumbling to the ground. He swore angrily. Harrison must be blind. No one could be that poor a shot.

He let himself go as he hit the ground and rolled over and up on one knee against the board fence. Harrison was standing in front of the stable with the rifle leveled directly at him. As Campbell watched, Harrison fired again, and Campbell felt the bullet spank into the ground beside him.

For a moment Campbell crouched there too bewildered to move, his mind awl. That first shot had grazed his shoulder, but he knew now it had been no accident. Harrison was trying to kill him. Harrison was evidently working with the four outlaws to hold up his own bank and was standing lookout for them in the alley while they cleaned out the safe. He'd probably hired them while he was supposed to have been in Kansas on business. All of which explained where Harrison had got all his money, why he could spend more than his father had. The holdup was his way of covering up his embezzlement of the bank's funds.

Harrison levered another shell into the chamber and aimed down at Campbell once more. Campbell quickly brought his pistol up and fired twice. Harrison dropped the rifle, clutched his leg and crumpled to the ground.

Campbell whirled at the sound of
(Continued On Page 88)

A TOWN FOR TROUBLE



The wild towns along the Gila were known to every gun-merchant north of the brimstone, so it was mighty damned funny, the big gent trying to warn Patsy Preston what a heller this one was

THERE WAS a man on the top of the rise. He was a big man with a sizeable pack behind his saddle, like he was travelling, too. He was at a dead stop, like he wanted to talk. Which was all right. It had been a long day and a steep one and Patsy Preston could use a breather. The man looked at him and he looked at the wagon. Then he grinned.

"Heading for Oak Creek?" he asked.

Patsy mopped his wide red face with a damp red rag and pushed his hat around so the tear in its crown would let the hot sun through onto a fresh spot on his bald scalp and nodded.

"Now, that's too bad," the big man offered amiably. And he shifted his heavy gun-belt like he'd lately done something of considerable foresight and wisdom. "Me, friend, I'm leaving that place!"

Patsy could see this was by way of being a friendly warning. one wayfarer to another, and he wanted to know the reason why. But the big man laughed without humor and shrugged.

"You're a trader, friend, and a trad-

er's got no sense but trading sense," he pointed out, "so you'd not see it. But it's no town for a stranger, right now, and personally, I'm for over the hill!"

Patsy allowed it was a hot day for riding and some distance to water in the direction the big man rode and the big man agreed he was asking for maybe an edge of misfortune. what without canteen and not an extra good horse.

"But I'm shut of Oak Creek for a spell, and I'd trade that town for a smoking slice of hell, right now! Luck to you, trader, and a short ride..."

It was a damn funny conversation, any way you took it. What with this big gent looking

like he'd fed on tough towns since his button days and most towns along the Gila being more or less hellers, anyway. Maybe this talk meant trouble. Talk usually did with Patsy Preston, sooner or later. He shook his head dolefully and set his team to lugging again....

THIS TOUGH town, this Oak Creek, hadn't a bad look to it for business when Patsy tipped down the

by **TOM W. BLACKBURN**

A pistol-barrel dropped the tall man.



TIME HONORED
WESTERN
★ ★ CLASSIC

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grade. He could see it was a trader's town. Not a finished building in it and not a painted one. Men busy in the hills had no time for driving a last pair of spikes and slapping up paint, molding, and trim. Hammer up something to keep the weather out and get going into the hills....

Patsy swung his wagon off the grade into the slanted run of the main street. At the far end was a corral and a likely gathering place for town-folk. He made a swift calculation, based on what apparent traffic the citizenry of Oak Creek could stand. Say four-bits a bag for the cased cookies he had out of the stock of a bankrupt store in Prescott. And two-fifty a jar for the potent lilac hair-grease out from Denver. Ten bucks a throw for the gross of bright-silk shirts from Chicago. And what they'd give him for the two dozen fancy brass watch-chains he'd won from Six-Bits Crail their last game at Santa Fe. Telling it all down, quick sale, he had maybe three thousand dollars in this wagon and a peddler's chance of dumping the whole load right here.

When he came abreast of a promising-looking bar, he shoved the head-weight of his team out of the box of the wagon with his toe and swung down to the walk. There were a couple of dozen men strung out here and there along the street. A bunch of them knotted up and started toward him at a dead run. A long and very thin gent was well out ahead until a dark-faced one came out from between the bar and the building next and dropped the tall one with his pistol-barrel as he came by. The dark one put his gun back in leather and caught Patsy's arm.

"Welcome to Oak Creek, stranger," he said. And he made it sound real. Too blamed earnest a welcome to be mere hospitality. Patsy backed a little away from him. The dark one followed him right up against the wagon. "Who's your friend?" he wanted to know.

Patsy gave him an easy grin, the sort of engaging face-twisting which will turn the edge of most things.

"Everybody's my friend, mister," Patsy told him. "That's my business..."

The dark one shook his head and

tightened his grip insistently. "Not in Oak Creek, it ain't," he warned earnestly. "Now, look, I'm Foster Larnin and Tim Smith is my man. If you've a notion of going in there for a drink..." he tipped his head toward the bar at his back, "...you'd do good to remember that when you come out!"

He let go his grip on Patsy's arm. Three men had stopped by the thin man this Larnin had dropped. They had the thin one on his feet and were moving abreast of him down the walk. Very cautious motion, and very grim. Patsy could see this was a pretty nasty situation, men getting clubbed and such. But the dark man wasn't turned at all by the advance of the others. He grinned, wheeled deliberately, and walked into the heavy shadow between the two buildings. Patsy thought he, too, would get off the street. And the bar was handy.

There were a lot of men inside. And all of them were at the bar, arguing some and drinking some, but mostly staring at a bunch of names chalked up on the back-bar mirror. There were two lists of these names, looking to be about equal. One of the lists was headed by that Tim Smith Foster Larnin seemed to have a liking for. The other was headed by the name of one Jim Carter. Patsy was looking at these listed names, thinking maybe something was afoot which might be almighty hard on his business, when the thin gent and his three companions came in off the street.

"Give the stranger a drink," the thin one said to the tender. He turned toward Patsy. "Friend, you started in bad company!"

It was not a hostile statement. But it had possibilities which Patsy did not enjoy. He scowled at the thin gent.

"I'm a trader, mister," he said evenly. "I do business where it is."

The thin man shrugged. "Maybe. But this is Oak Creek. And there's an election tomorrow. Now, what's your name, peddler?"

"Errol Preston, friend, and called Patsy for reasons no man knows. A trader in first-class goods and fancy trappings. A fair man in a deal and one to mind his own business!"

The thin man nodded solemnly. The bar-keep took up his chalk.

"Once a year we get us a new mayor and marshal in Oak Creek," the thin man said slowly. "And it's important. This is the time, now, stranger. There's two men up, a miner and a townsman, and two sides ready to vote. As you can see, if you'll count the names on the back-bar mirror, we're split even. So there's got to be an extra vote, and it'd appear you're it. Agreed?"

Patsy looked again at the lists on the mirror. He looked at the thin man. He thought about the dark-faced Foster Larnin and his ready gun-barrel. And he thought about the three thousand dollar wagon-load of goods he'd hauled to this town. Slowly he shook his head.

The thin man nodded. "That's right, Preston," he admitted. "A man should go easy. Slow and careful. That's healthy, if he doesn't make it last too long. You'd best be off the fence by morning. You see how it is..."

PATSY NODDED. The thin man spoke to the tender with the chalk. The man put up Patsy's name on the glass, right in the middle of the mirror, and with a big question-mark right after it. Everybody looked at it and then they looked at Patsy. Patsy took another drink and went outside to his wagon. Those men in the bar were all Smith men.

And, too, he was pretty clear now on why the big, gun-hung man on the ridge had left this place. It was a good place to leave. Ballots in the air were apt to make any town touchy, but a place like this, split even...

Patsy got his wagon down to the corral and the tilt up over it and a platform rigged and some dinner in his belly. By that time night was down tight and Oak Creek was moving about on the street in tight little groups that set up sparks like flinted steel when they passed each other and he could see the whole thing needed only a good fuse and the lid would go off sky high and take his chance of business with it.

It was a tough row and he was thinking hard about getting the wagon made up again and rolling on somewhere's else, when the dark-faced Larnin came along and climbed up on his

wagon and commenced a string of talk out of which an idea came to Patsy.

"Look, friend," Patsy told him, "this is only a one-lung election. It ain't a war. Now, I figger a peddler ought to have a chance, being new and all..."

Larnin agreed solemnly. "Certain. Likely this looks funny to you, Preston, and maybe you don't like the way I bent my piece over long Slim Dunnevan's head, back there on the street when you rolled in. But this is more than a plain election. This is a damn big fight. This town belongs to the bar men and the store men and the livery men and everybody that's got a shack along the street and it lives by one game. Slug the miners. Tax 'em, charge 'em, cheat 'em. Every turn. But the only money there is comes from them that digs it out of the ground. And it isn't a square set-up. Personally, I'd a sight rather be out on my claim in the hills, right now, working instead of sticking my head into the mouth of Dunnevan and his playmates. But something has got to be done.

"I'm duly elected president of a miner's association, and I've got to stick down here to let the boys know when the show starts and to be sure the count is right for us when the count is started. I've matched Dunnevan man for man, but I can't beat him...yet..."

Patsy scowled. "That's troublesome," he said gravely. "If this was my town and I was that worried, I'd call in the law till after tomorrow!"

Larnin chuckled ruefully. "I did, Preston. I called in John Capehart, clean from the county seat. He rode in and sat down on the hotel steps and told us to go ahead and no hitting low. It looked pretty good until Dunnevan came around and told John that being he was here, he'd have to vote, and reminding him he was a town man himself.

"He's a smart man, that Capehart. He got back in his saddle and headed out of town. Said he couldn't vote, being outsider like he was. He claimed if he stayed and kept peace while we voted, whichever side lost would claim he'd helped the other, and the fighting would go right on. He said it was up to us to settle this our own way, among us all right here. Then he'd

come back and put his shoulder behind the winner and nobody would have a kick coming that they'd been trimmed by the law!"

"The vote's in the morning," Patsy said thoughtfully. "If I'm to sell, I'll have to work tonight."

"It could be a deal," Larnin suggested as he slid off the platform. "You do your part and I'll pass the word."

"I will think about it," Patsy agreed.

PRESTON had his lanterns lit and some of his things laid out where a man could look at them and a sack full of coins in his pocket for change and his dust-scales handy and there was an edge of a crowd gathering about him when the thin man, Slim Dunnevan, and three others, shouldered their way up.

"You can't hawk your stuff tonight, peddler!" Dunnevan said. And he moved close to add softly, "It'll bring the miners down from the hills and we don't want them!"

"They got good money to spend," Patsy answered him. And he thought about John Capehart, riding out of this town. It was a good game. Dunnevan shot a hard, quick look at him. Then he looked swiftly over the loaded wagon.

"So that's it!" he barked. "Foster Larnin will get you the miner's trade. Hell, Preston, I'll buy your counting vote, personally, for two thousand if you'll close up and use my ballot in the morning!"

"I like my trading in the open, one man at a time and face to face. I'll do it that way, now!" Patsy replied.

Dunnevan backed away, followed by his fellows. They made a dark shadow beyond the rim of lamplight. They broke up after a little. And later yet, having done a little business with the first of the miners, Patsy went back into the wagon under the tilt for some more of the gaudy shirts. Some hands were waiting for him back there, hard, quick, rough hands which had crawled in over the tail-gate. It was dark in the wagon. And Patsy liked dark fighting. Round men were not always soft. He ruined the tilt with the first of them, sent him sprawling out backwards through the side of the canvas. One of the others

gotched one of his big ears with a wild chop and he broke the man in the middle over a fist sunk deep under his ribs. There was a gun-barrel loose in there, too, but it hurt him only once. He tossed the two he had downed inside out through the open front onto the platform, picked up his shirts, and came out into the lantern-light himself.

There was blood on him and sight of it turned an ugly note loose among the miners. Patsy grinned at him. It was time the men from the hills had a little part of the ugly business in this town if there was to be ugly business afoot. Slim Dunnevan was in the tailings of the crowd again and Patsy could see, even at a distance, the blackness of profanity surge over the thin man's face. Dunnevan turned away and stamped back up the street. Directly a file of men began to filter down among the miners, to thicken the business at the platform. And Patsy grinned at himself. He grinned wider when he heard a townsman growl to one of his fellows.

"Hell, Slim says the peddler's got a trunk of bargains and a man's a fool to miss them. Look at this stuff. All junk!"

It would appear Dunnevan was making a bid to match Larnin's miners. Stuff rolled across the platform. Patsy's change-sack grew heavy and his boxes thin. Somebody got some box wood and built up a good fire on beyond the wagon and miners and townsmen split to either side of it, making a long night short and waiting.

The time came soon enough. A bad time when tempers are short in the thin hours beyond the mark of midnight. Patsy was done. He blew out his lanterns and unrigged his platform. He was nearly stowed before Larnin came toward him and Slim Dunnevan moved out from the other fire to match the miner. Larnin stopped and lifted the harness to one side of Patsy's team. Dunnevan stood a dozen yards away, legs taut and waiting for the right break. Finally he took a step.

"It's your turn, now, peddler," he barked. "Get away from that miner and stay away from him until you've cast your damned ballot!"

Patsy Preston straightened above

his work in the box of the wagon. He turned slowly to full face against Dunnevan. The man was half bent, almost crouched, taut. Patsy could see there was a fuse to Oak Creek, now. A short one and lighted.

"Maybe you don't understand me," he told the man carefully. "I do business. I brought goods in here, boxed goods in my wagon. I set a price and offered them. Oak Creek had the price and it bought. I had nothing to sell but my goods. Oak Creek had nothing to buy but the same. That's the way I see it. I am no part of Oak Creek. I am a peddler. I have no right to vote. I do not aim to cast a ballot!"

CLOSE UNDER the wagon, Patsy heard Larnin's sharp intake of breath. But he was watching the thin man. And even that was near not enough. Dunnevan had been cocked. Now he fired swiftly. Patsy tried to dodge and tripped, tumbling headlong back into the wagon. Dunnevan's slug caught a bow and shook the tilt. But it cleared him. A roar tumbled up out of the crowd outside, and the cough of a gun. He came back to his knees in the opening of the canvas with his ten-gauge bird-gun across both his wide hands. Such a gun was the only medicine for a crowd.

But it was all over. Slim Dunnevan lay a little apart, face down. Larnin was standing also apart, his dark face white and shaken, running the ejector-rod of his gun absently back and forth through a chamber from which the spent shell had already been punched. And the rest of them, a crowd of men hardly split apart, so that miner and townsman were here and there elbow-to-elbow, were staring at the man Larnin had killed. The thirst for power was gone now, from this election gathered crew, and with it, the ruthlessness. Patsy put his bird-gun back into the wagon and let his brake down...

The big man was in a bottom, this time, half a dozen miles out from Oak Creek in the bright of the morning sun. A big man on a dusty horse, halted beside the road and wanting to

talk again. Patsy pulled his wagon up. The big man swung down and walked over to lift the tarp and look into the empty wagon-bed. His keen eyes did not miss even the lead-scarred tilt-bow. He turned around.

"I'm John Capehart, trader," he offered. "I'm sheriff of this county. You had good business at Oak Creek?"

"Reasonable," Patsy Preston admitted. "I'm sold out!"

"Now, that's good, trader," he approved. "And you had trouble?"

Patsy knew what the big man wanted to know and he could see that Foster Larnin had been right about the man. He was a good sheriff and wise. And he knew how to handle his towns. Patsy did not like a lot of little questions when one big one would do.

"Look, sheriff," he protested amiably, "Tim Smith was elected back there. I've got the three thousand dollars I drove in to make. And I never cast a vote. So it's legal. One man is dead that should be dead and the miners polled the most ballots with his out. It's an even deal between you and me and the town..."

John Capehart nodded once more.

"You are a wise man, trader," he said. "You know how a man thinks and how to make him work for you. It's enough. When I seen you on the ridge yesterday I figgered you might trip the trick. Now, I need me a deputy for that woolly town, and..."

Patsy shook his head blandly. "Some folks is stubborn, but this valley is the worst. You'd pay a deputy three thousand dollars a job? Like hell! I'm a peddler and you're the law and we see down the same sights. But there's nothing else between us. If I did you a favor, pass it along back in Oak Creek. I made my take and I'm square..."

John Capehart chuckled and rose to his saddle once more. "Good luck to you, trader," he said. "And a short ride..."

"I hope so, Sheriff," Patsy Preston answered, and he lifted his team.

●END

TIN-BADGE BACKED-BUSHWHACKER

by D. B. NEWTON

The blow took
the deputy full
in the jaw.



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If anybody figured to frame robbery and murder on Johnny Haines, he wouldn't find Johnny empty-holstered and behind bars!

IT WAS PIKE KRAMER hung the deadwood on Johnny Haines. Big, shaggy Pike Kramer—hard as the rocks that he haunted; wild as the animals he trapped for a living, up Squaw Mountain way. He stalked into the sheriff's office, where the lawman and his deputy sat with feet on the desk, and blurted out gruffly, without preface: "Thought I better tell you what I seen, the day it rained last week."

Both officers took their feet down quickly, exchanging swift glances. Sheriff Whelan said, "You mean the day of the holdup?"

TIME ★ HONORED
WESTERN ★
★ ★ CLASSIC

Kramer nodded, and unshorn hair brushed his shoulders. "I just now heard about that. If it was four o'clock, that's about the time I saw this rider up in the hills, near the pass. I couldn't tell much about him, what with the rain and the hurry he was in. But he was forkin' a sorrel with a silver mane and tail, and I'd know that again if I ever laid eyes on it." The trapper thought a minute longer, shrugged. "Reckon that's all. Just thought I better tell you."

For a long time after he'd taken his bulk out of the office, Sheriff Whelan and his deputy sat silently looking at each other. Tom Whelan appeared stunned, like a man who had been struck in the face. "Johnny Haines!" he said finally.

The deputy, Brock Sutton, agreed. "That's his bronc, all right—that sorrel, yep, sure is."

"Do you suppose Kramer's lying?"

"I wouldn't know," the deputy said. "But it's worth investigating—the first lead we've had, and almost a week now since the stage was robbed."

The county's takin' the loss of that fifteen thousand dollar bank shipment pretty serious, Tom. Not to mention the killing of the driver; Ben Oldham was popular."

THE SHERIFF nodded, sighed heavily as he got to his feet. "I don't like to think about it," he said. "I see how Johnny Haines might figure he could use some money. Things are still going pretty slow on that one-man spread of his, and he and Ann don't show signs of bein' able to get hitched right away."

He took his hat from the desk. "Well, I hope I'm enough of a lawman not to let my daughter stand in the way, if it ever comes to that. . . . Come on, Brock. It's probably all a mistake; Johnny must have had some good reason for bein' in the hills that day. We'll just drop over to his place, and see what we find."

What they found was the wrappers from part of the stolen money, with the name of the bank stamped on them! They were in Johnny's barn, under the hay; so easy to locate that they almost yelled out at the officers when Whelan and his deputy stepped inside. The sheriff dug the wrappers out and stood with them in his hands, staring at them.

"There you are," Brock Sutton told him. "Looks like that's it."

Sheriff Tom Whelan shook his head. "I can't believe it! There's got to be a mistake somewhere! But for now, with this evidence against him, I guess I'll just have to wait 'til he comes home, and jail him on suspicion."

But Johnny Haines didn't come home. The lawmen sat out on the ranchhouse veranda until the wide skies darkened, and their cigarettes were bright eyes against the night. They waited and they waited. But he didn't show up.

It was worse luck that Tom Whelan's daughter, Ann, should ride in on her little paint pony, just before sunset. Because the sheriff had to tell her the news; had to watch her pretty blue eyes widen in horror, and see the small brown hand go up to touch her tightening throat. Now she, too, waited. Once in a while, Whelan could

hear a muffled sob coming from the darkness of the vines—vines that she had planted herself, and trained across the porch of the little house that she and Johnny Haines had planned, someday, to share. It came near breaking the lawman's heart, hearing her cry like that. But there was nothing he could say to comfort her.

Close to nine o'clock, Whelan got to his feet at last. "He's not coming," the sheriff announced. "Probably got wind of what was up; maybe somebody tipped him off."

"What are you gonna do?" Brock Sutton asked.

Trying to shut the presence of the girl from his mind, Tom Whelan said: "Tomorrow I'll take out a posse." He swept a lean arm toward the deep shadow of the mountains, in the west. "He's up there in the hills somewhere. We'll tear them apart 'til we find him. . . ."

In the upper reaches of those hills, young Johnny Haines squatted before a campfire and cooked himself a tasteless supper. The sheriff was right. He had been warned—but it was Ann Whelan who did it! She had seen him coming, riding home from a day's toil at burying fence posts and stringing wire, and got to him before her father or Brock Sutton knew that he was near. Johnny's face had drained of color as she told him what was brewing.

"It's a frameup!" he'd declared, stoutly. "I was down in the river breaks that day, chousin' strays. I don't know anything about the money."

"Of course you don't!" There was not a shade of distrust in her blue eyes. "But dad and Brock Sutton are waiting for you—"

Jaw hard, he picked up the reins. "What are you going to do?" she exclaimed.

"Face it out, of course. I'm not guilty!"

"But Johnny!" Startled, she seized his arm. "Dad will jail you if you can't explain those wrappers—and you know you can't! You mustn't let him."

HE HESITATED then, knowing she was right. If somebody was

trying to frame him—trying to shove robbery and murder onto his shoulders—then Johnny Haines couldn't afford to let the sheriff take him. He'd have to be free to fight; fight for his life, and for his own and Ann Whelan's happiness!

And so he had fled, much as he hated to. He had fled with Ann's kiss still tingling on his lips; her sob-choked, "Good luck, *amigo*!" in his ears. Now the silver-maned sorrel was pulling at the grass nearby, and Johnny hunkered in the red light of the fire trying futilely to work things out.

None of it made sense. There had been no passengers on that held-up stage; no one but the murdered driver. The fierce August rainstorm had washed out every sign of a track. The whole business had been a closed case from the very beginning. Then why should the killer—the one who planted those money wrappings—deliberately open it again by trying to pin it on Johnny Haines?

No reason at all, unless— Unless he had a personal grudge to settle, maybe. But Johnny Haines didn't know of anybody who would take him that seriously.

He wrestled with the problem while he ate; even while he slept. By daylight, he still hadn't got anywhere.

In the afternoon, he saddled up and rode down to a little park under a blazed pine, where he and Ann had come on a picnic one day the Spring before. She had promised to meet him here if she learned anything that might help him. He waited for her a long time, but she didn't come. As he sat on a log smoking, he couldn't help but think how happy they had been here together, that day such a few short weeks ago.

But until he had more information to work on, there was absolutely nothing he could do. The inaction, the feeling of having his hands tied, was hardest to bear. The next day, Ann Whelan still did not appear, and Johnny swore that he couldn't stand another twenty-four hours of this. But on the third morning, when he rode down to visit the rendezvous, he found a sack of canned goods tied to

the limb of a tree, and a note for him inside:

Dear Johnny:

Sorry I couldn't come before, but I've got to be careful or Dad may suspect something. I haven't even time to stay this morning and see you.

The bank has identified the money wrappers. They haven't found any of the loot at your place, though—naturally! A trapper from Squaw Mountain, named Pike Kramer, was the one who first put them on your trail. He claimed he saw you up near the pass at the time of the robbery, on your sorrel. Or so Daddy tells me.

The posse is still out. It hurts me to see Dad wearing himself out, in the saddle night and day, hunting for you—when all the time I know where you are. But that's the way it has to be.

*Take care of yourself, *amigo*.
Ann.*

Johnny read that note through three times, and then settled on one name. Pike Kramer. He didn't even know the shaggy Squaw Mountain trapper, although he'd had the man pointed out to him once or twice in town; he'd always looked on him as a freak, dour and hardened by solitude. But now, whether or not Kramer was himself the actual stagerobber, it looked as though he were doing his part to frame an innocent man.

SQUAW MOUNTAIN pushed its snow cap into the blue of the morning, above the lower hills. Johnny looked at it for a long moment. Then, abruptly, he shoved Ann Whelan's note into his pocket; caught up the reins of his sorrel bronc. His face was lean and grim as he forked the saddle.

...He heard the shot, thin and clear, as he was easing down through the mountain growth that stood above Pike Kramer's cabin. It hauled him up; and the instinct of the hunted was already strong enough in Johnny Haines to put his six-gun into his hand as he listened. But there was no repetition. He dropped the weapon back into holster and rode on, cau-

tiously, until a break in the brush curtain gave him a view of the cabin itself.

It was a crude affair, thrown together in a clearing of the pines. Johnny saw the glint of metal in sunlight, where steel traps were lying on a bench beside the door. But he saw more than that. He saw the body crumpled on matted pine needles, where it had fallen from the bench. By the bulk of him, Johnny knew it was Kramer; and from here the man looked dead.

That explained the shot, then; but there wasn't any sign of the one who had fired it. As Johnny came nearer, the clearing was still, soundless. A blue jay began its chatter in the pines, somewhere up the hill. It looked as though the murderer had done his his work, and sneaked softly away.

Puzzled, Johnny swung down and walked over to Kramer's body. He turned the man over, saw the blood on the front of his hickory shirt and on the ground. The eyes were closed, the bearded jaw slack....

A voice behind Johnny said, "Don't touch your shootin' iron!"

He froze. Straightened slowly, and turned to see Brock Sutton standing in the half shadows at the edge of the clearing. Tom Whelan's deputy had a six-gun in his hand, and a tight smile on his good looking face.

"Killed the man who tipped off the law, did you?" Sutton continued, as Johnny said nothing. "I warned Tom about this, but he wouldn't listen to me. Didn't think you'd do a thing like that, I reckon. So I been waiting here on my own, for you to show up and try it."

Johnny was looking at him steadily, silently. He said now: "You're lying, aren't you Brock? You killed him yourself—and then got out of sight when you saw me coming!"

IF HE EXPECTED Sutton to explode at that suggestion, he was wrong. The deputy only lifted one eyebrow, as though in surprise, and looked at him like that for a minute. Then he came to Johnny and jerked the gun out of his holster, sticking it in his own waistband. He still had his own gun in his hand.

"Smart feller," the deputy said

mockingly. "Sure I killed him—because he was gettin' set to renege on that windy I made him tell the sheriff about you."

"Then I guess it was you robbed the stage, too," Johnny said.

"That's right." Sutton was grinning at him. "I don't mind admitting it, because you aren't gonna get to repeat it to anybody. The fifteen thousand's in my room at the hotel," he went on, pleasantly. "A reasonable time after you and Kramer are found here, where you've shot each other to pieces, a rich uncle of mine back East or someplace is gonna die and leave me a nice little bunch of money. With that for an inducement, I don't think it'll be hard to make Miss Ann Whelan forget her stagerobbing boy friend."

"So that's why you framed me!" Johnny Haines said, tight lipped. "Because of Ann!"

The deputy's face was suddenly ugly. "Don't you think I ever get jealous, seeing her make over you? Seeing the looks she gives you sometimes? I was in love with that girl before you ever knew her. We was kids together. But she never gave me a tumble; and then—you came along!"

"And you think you can get her now by putting me out of the way," said Johnny. "You're a fool, Brock!"

"We'll see about that!" the deputy grunted. "Or rather, I will—you won't be around to care."

The gun in his hand leaped up into line, suddenly. Johnny's face paled a little. "Go ahead, damn you!" he invited, grimly. "Shoot and get it over with!"

Brock Sutton didn't answer. He was still a green hand at the business of cold murder, although he had already killed Ben Oldham, the driver of the stage, and only a minute ago put a second bullet into the body of Pike Kramer. Looking at him, Johnny Haines could sense the tightness of nerves as the deputy readied for another kill. His own body was tense, waiting for the bite of the lead, already feeling it pound hotly into his flesh—

And then Pike Kramer let out a groan! The deputy leaped at the sudden sound, twisted his head and his whole body instinctively to stare at the man he thought was dead. The

gun dragged away; for an instant, Johnny Haines was free of its menace. And he took advantage of that chance.

He waded in, craggy fist arcing. Too late, Brock Sutton got control of himself and turned on him. The gun in his hand rose; Johnny knocked it aside and smashed a blow against the deputy's face.

Sutton fell back a step as blood sprang from a cut lip. He struck with the gunbarrel. It stunned Johnny's shoulder, but didn't stop him. For Johnny's fist was swinging again; the blow, driven hard at close quarters, took the deputy full in the jaw. He dropped suddenly, without a sound.

He was out, cold.

A LITTLE dazed himself, Johnny Haines stood looking down at him for a moment as he blew thoughtfully on skinned knuckles. Then he thought of the guns, and quickly stooped and retrieved his own weapon from Sutton's waistband. The deputy's revolver he tossed into the brush at the edge of the clearing.

Another groan from Pike Kramer pulled him around. The trapper had his eyes open, and was trying feebly to get an elbow against the earth. Johnny went to him quickly. He saw at once that shock of the wound had put the man out momentarily, but far from killed him. He needed attention, though—at once.

Johnny took Kramer into his arms, and staggering under the weight of him got the trapper inside the cabin and into the bunk that occupied one corner. Spying a rope, he took it outside and trussed up Brock Sutton with it, dragging the unconscious deputy over to the door where he could keep an eye on him. Then he went to work on Kramer.

Sutton's bullet had drilled straight through the upper part of the man's body, making a clean wound and a bloody one. With the aid of a torn shirt and whiskey for antiseptic, Johnny's crude art soon had him bandaged after a fashion; but a doctor would have to take over now.

"Thanks," Kramer said, when it was done. He had been conscious, silently enduring, all through the ordeal of the whiskey and the binding. He looked at Johnny now with a strange light in

his sullen, deep set eyes. "You're Haines, ain't you?" he demanded.

Johnny inclined his head, eyeing the man who had helped to frame him.

"I dunno why you should take any trouble for me after the mess I got you in. I'm almighty sorry, and I aim to square it with you as far as I can." The big trapper gestured feebly toward a table across the room. "In the drawer there you'll find a letter I'd just finished writing when that skunk Sutton showed up. You get it and take it to the sheriff.

"It won't help you a lot," Kramer went on, "but it's the best I can do. It'll tell that I was lying when I said I seen you up here, that day. And it'll tell why I said it—because Brock Sutton forced me to. Because he knew I was wanted at Deer Lodge for a term I never finished, and used that to make me help him frame you. All that's in the letter."

"If I show it to the law," Johnny pointed out, "you'll go back to the pen."

The long-maned head nodded. "I know. I used to think I couldn't stand that—not after the years of freedom I've had here in the mountains. But I been thinkin' it over, and I don't care any more. That's what I told Sutton, just now—and he plugged me!"

Johnny got the letter out of the table drawer. It was scrawled in Kramer's angular hand. "I won't use this unless I have to," he said. He pocketed it, looked down at Pike Kramer's bearded face that was tight with pain. "I'm ridin' in now. I'll send a doctor to you, right away."

Brock Sutton was where he had left him, jaw swollen and eyes sultry as he glared up at his captor, Johnny knew he must have recovered in time to hear everything that went on inside the cabin. He told him: "You're gonna have trouble talking your way out of this one, Brock. The paper in my pocket, and the fifteen thousand the sheriff finds in your hotel room, will about fix you."

THE FACT that Sutton could only glare without answering showed that he knew well enough the tight he was in.

Johnny left him and went to the place where he'd tied his roan. He

also found Sutton's mount, deep in the trees, and brought both horses back to the cabin. He untied his prisoner's ankles and pointed at the waiting saddle. "Climb up there, mister," he ordered sharply.

And that was how they covered the long miles into town—Brock Sutton with wrists bound, and his bronc anchored to Johnny's saddle horn. As they came down through the stages of the hills, working toward the flatlands, Johnny Haines was worried, well aware of the risk he took. Wanted for murder himself, he might not have much of an opportunity to show anyone that paper in his pocket which was his only witness. He wondered uneasily what would happen if he ran into a posse. Or—worse yet—some of Brock Sutton's friends. Sheriff Whelan, he knew, would give him a chance; but some of the others, hungry for the reward that the stage company had posted, might shoot first and listen afterwards.

But they met no one; and, almost in sight of town, Brock Sutton spoke for the first time. "Give me an hour, Haines," he said, abruptly. "Just give me an hour out of the country, and you can have the fifteen thousand for yourself."

The effrontery of that made Johnny's face blank, bunched his muscles with a desire to hit him again. "Keep goin'," he ordered, harshly, when he had control of himself. "Remember, you got Ben Oldham to account for. Ben was a good friend of mine."

Brock Sutton's jaw clamped hard.

Bear Claw was hot and sleepy in the early afternoon, its dusty streets practically empty as they rode in, and no one seemed to notice them. Johnny headed straight for the sheriff's office, half a block off Main Street. He hoped fervently Tom Whelan would be in, for it would help immensely if he were, But Johnny was out of luck—

The crash of the gunshot came from the side, and behind him; the bullet hit his body with a force that twisted him in the saddle, and drove clear thought from his mind. He caught a glimpse of a man on the sidewalk, the smoking six-gun in his hand; recognized him as Ed Horn, one of Brock

Sutton's pals. And almost at the same instant he saw the deputy himself, leaping from saddle, and realized dimly that the man had somehow managed to get his hand free without Johnny knowing it.

Then black fog and pain seized him. He was falling. The earth took his body with a sickening jolt that made him feel as though he could never move again.

Hands were tearing at his clothing. He knew it was Brock Sutton, after that paper with Kramer's confession, and that the deputy mustn't be allowed to get it. But right then it was too great an effort for Johnny to raise a finger, to make the least attempt to stop him. He could only lie still and feel the paper jerked out of the pocket of his coat, and the gun from its holster, and know in that moment that he had failed.

VOICES were speaking above him—Ed Horn and the deputy. Sutton was saying, "Thanks, Ed. The murderin' skunk was tryin' to pull a fast one on me."

And Horn: "I saw you signal to me. Just creased him, I reckon."

"I wish to hell you'd done more'n that! Well, come on and help me with him..."

Their hands were lifting him up then. But Johnny's strength was returning slowly, and he struggled with them. He actually managed to roll free an instant; get his knees under him and start to push to his feet. But a blow landed on the side of his head, exploding in a pinwheel of stars, and his limbs turned to water again.

Then suddenly there was confusion. Many voices, countless hoofs drumming the earth, dust billowing. The posse, pounding into town! They broke and eddied around the place where Brock Sutton and Horn stood over the prisoner's bleeding form. "Haines!" the sheriff's voice exclaimed. "You got Johnny Haines!"

Johnny was on his knees, staring stupidly at the earth. Pain possessed the whole right side of his body in a burning grip. But then he was aware of an arm coming about his shoulders, and looked up into the face, the ear-filled blue eyes of Ann Whelan. She

must have just run out to meet the returning posse. He heard her say: "Johnny! Oh, my darling!"

Past her head, he caught sight of the sheriff, of other men he knew—standing still and looking at him. He shifted his glance and it fell on Brock Sutton's darkly handsome face.

The sight of him jogged his lagging thoughts. His lips moved stiffly. He heard himself croak: "The paper—"

"What, dear?" Ann asked him.

"The paper!" he repeated, trying to clear his own mind. "Brock's got it—"

The deputy snorted, derisively. "He's out of his head! I don't know anything about a paper. Search me, if you want to."

Johnny shrugged. He knew Sutton must be telling the truth. He'd got rid of it, somewhere. But how could he, in those very few minutes? Johnny didn't know. He couldn't think straight any more.

But he could hear the deputy saying: "I nabbed the varmint upon Squaw Mountain—just after he got through murdering Pike Kramer. He shot him down in cold blood!"

"No!" The sheriff's voice was incredulous.

"I saw him do it! Remember, Tom, I warned you of that, all along; but you wouldn't listen to me. You said Haines wasn't that kind of a snake. Well, maybe now you know!"

A stir of angry voices moved through the crowd. Even Ann Whelan, with a gasp, had jerked her hands way from Johnny as though she suddenly couldn't bear to touch him. Nor was there any friendliness, either, in the sheriff's blue eyes, when Johnny's glance reached him. Johnny shook his head, trying to speak.

"Well, get the doctor, somebody," Tom Whelan ordered harshly. "Brock, you give me a hand with this gent."

Brock Sutton said: "You do it, Ed. There's something else I got to attend to right now."

AS ED HORN and the sheriff started for the wounded prisoner, to pick him up from the dust and carry him to jail, Brock Sutton turned on his heel and headed down the street with quick, chopping steps, the reins of his bronc trailing over his shoulder.

No one paid any attention to his leaving—no one but Johnny Haines; but as Johnny stared after the deputy something inside him was crying out: *No...no!*

They musn't let Sutton get away! He had the paper Pike Kramer had signed, stating that Kramer's accusation of Johnny Haines was a lie forced out of him by the power of blackmail. And now—as well as though Sutton had told him—Johnny knew the deputy was on his way to seal Kramer's lips forever, and remove the last obstacle from his path. Hadn't he already told Tom Whelan the trapper was dead? Sutton would have to see to it now that he was!

"Stop him!" Johnny tried to shout. The words came out thickly. Now the sheriff was leaning over him, getting hands under his armpits. Ed Horn loomed on the other side...

It was the mental picture of Pike Kramer being killed that gave Johnny the strength he needed. Wild Pike Kramer, who loved the mountains and the sky but was willing to return to Deer Lodge, and pay out his life behind its walls for some long-forgotten crime, rather than go through with his part in the framing of an innocent man. Brock Sutton would find the trapper lying helpless in his bunk; the life in that great body pathetically easy to quench—

A desperate surging of strength flooded through him—strength that defied the agony of his wound. And as Tom Whelan, unsuspecting, got hands underneath him to lift him up, Johnny Haines came driving to his feet.

One hand clamped suddenly about the sheriff's body, dragging him close for a living shield. The other snaked the six-gun from his holster before Whelan could get to it in his surprise; leveled it in a swinging arc at the stupefied posse. With the revolver backing the words, Johnny said in a strange, cracked voice: "Hold it—every one of you! Hold it if you don't want a dead sheriff—"

They obeyed; all except Ed Horn. He thought he could get a shot in without hitting the sheriff, and he dragged out his six-shooter for a try. But before it was clear of the holster,

Johnny Haines' weapon had jerked around toward him. It flamed; lead took the man in the fleshy part of his gun arm. Ed Horn staggered back, clapping a hand over the wound as the weapon dropped to the ground.

"Unbuckle your guns," Johnny ordered, crisply, and the men obeyed, letting the heavy belts slide into the dust at their feet. Johnny wondered how he'd had the wits to think of saying that. It would give him a few more seconds.

But a weakness in his limbs told him his strength wouldn't hold much longer. He cast one more glance at Ann Whelan; her face was white as she looked at him with her father helpless in his grasp. No time to care what she thought of him now... With a quick shove, he hurled the lawman full into the midst of the possemen and turned, started running after the man he had to kill.

HE DIDN'T make for his horse; that wasn't necessary, for Brock Sutton had stepped into the hotel that was a few doors down the street. The deputy's bronc was waiting at the hitch rack in front of it—waiting to take him up to Squaw Mountain, and the murder of Pike Kramer. But this way, there was a chance that Johnny could stop him.

He was yards from the doorway when the first bullet went past his ear. The posse was coming after him now, running and yelling, unlimbering with the guns they had scooped up from the dust. But Johnny plunged ahead.

Then he was up the plank steps and dodging into the momentary safety of the hotel. His legs were wobbling under him by this time, threatening to buckle with every stride. The lobby—even the clerk's desk—was vacant. Johnny knew where Brock Sutton's room was, however, and he headed for the stairs and went up them a couple at a time.

At the top of the flight he was hanging on to the bannister, dragging himself over the last step as he came into the musty hallway. The door of Sutton's room was closed. Johnny reached it, put a shoulder against it as he wrenched the knob; let it fall open under his weight.

On his knees at the side of the bed, Brock Sutton looked up, stared. He had an open suitcase in front of him, and was in the act of transferring flat packets of money from it to a pair of leather saddlebags. That was the reason he had come to the hotel, of course. Unable to think clearly, it had somehow slipped Johnny's pain-be-fuddled mind that the deputy had told him where the loot was hidden. Sooner or later, though, he would have remembered; and it was imperative that Sutton get rid of it first. Even the killing of Pike Kramer would have to wait for that.

Now, with hate twisting his dark features, Brock Sutton looked up at Johnny bursting into his room, and at the gun in Johnny's hand. He didn't hesitate. He had some of the thick money packets in his hand, and he hurled them straight into the face of the man at the door. At the same moment he threw himself to the carpet and swept up the gun that lay at his feet.

Johnny didn't duck quick enough. One of the money packets hit him across the cheek, and a corner scraped his eye. The tears came streaming hotly. And that brief advantage might have spelled the difference for Brock Sutton. A bullet from the deputy's revolver clapped into the wall close by Johnny's head; the next one might not miss.

Desperately, Johnny focused on the blurred figure that was all he could see of the man across from him. He pulled trigger at it, blindly, again and again, until the hammer clicked on an empty chamber.

And all the lights in the world went suddenly black...

THE BANDAGING was done, and the doctor had started for Squaw Mountain to take a look at Pike Kramer's wounds; and Tom Whelan had left, too, with a word about arranging payment of the reward the bank had offered. That reward money, he hinted, ought to be enough to fix up any cow spread in the country, and put in on a basis where a man could begin to know he had something. When Johnny and the girl were alone in the sheriff's office, Ann Whelan

(Please Turn To Page 88)

SIDED BY A SHORTHORN

by GLENN H. WICHMAN

WHEN MATT McCLUSKY'S son Jim failed to show up for breakfast Matt went to the boy's room. He stood outside the door and hollered:

"Pull your freight, button! It's time for the nosebag!"

Old man McClusky expected to hear his son yawn and thrash the covers aside and then would come the sound of his two feet hitting the floor. It was something to have a boy

of nineteen, tall, straight and as strong as a young mule. The only trouble was that Jim didn't seem to care overly much for the cow-business—but then he was young, he would learn, he would gradually work up a fondness for it.

Suddenly Matt realized that no sounds had come from the bedroom. He called again. There was still no answer, so he opened the door.

Matt McClusky didn't figure his button couldn't take care of himself along the dim trails — he just guessed the kid might welcome a saddlepard

TIME ★ HONORED
WESTERN ★
★ ★ CLASSIC



Five men went for their guns. The canyon was filled with powdersmoke.

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The bed was empty; it had not been slept in. For many months Matt McClusky had been dreading that some such moment as this would come. Jim had been restless for a long time, riding much at night and there had been often a frightening, faraway look in his blue eyes.

On the dresser, weighted down by a bottle of ink, was a sheet of paper. Matt McClusky read:

Dear Pa:

Lately I've become acquainted with Chuck Norris, the fellow that they call The Socorro Kid. Socorro ain't half as bad a guy as they paint him. He's been right nice to me and a lot of poor people and I'm putting in with him and his two men. That'll make four of us, which'll be a handy number. I'm taking the place of Willie Schultz who was hung a while back.

Don't think too hard of me but I've had a bellyful of sticking around a cow ranch. There's nothing to it. I get sick every time I look at a bossy. This is a free country and a man can live as he pleases. I'd rather live one year the way I want to than sixty years the way I don't want to. Just forget about me, pa, and go on and live the way you want to.

I'm heading for a place that Socorro calls Spider Roost. There's no use looking for me. Of course you don't know where it is. Nobody knows except the four of us. Take care of yourself, pa, and don't worry about me. I'll look after myself.

Your son,

Jim McClusky.

OLD MAN McClusky tried to keep his heart from sinking through his bootheels. It's well written anyway, he thought desperately. While Jim was at school he learned how to write letters. But he's made one mistake. He had to be a little boastful. He couldn't resist speakin' of the Spider Roost, just to show off. I reckon I'm the only guy around here besides Jim an' those three outlaw skunks that knows where it is.

Matt McClusky ate his bacon and

eggs alone and drank his coffee. Then he packed saddle bags with trail grub, put on an extra gun and went outside and hunted up his foreman, Les Johns.

"Les," Matt said, "I'm goin' to be gone away for a spell. Can't tell how long it'll be. Jim an' me have a deal on that'll take some ridin'. He's started out already. I'm goin' to meet him tomorrow."

A ghost of a smile played on Les Johns' lips, a sympathetic smile. "You put it nice, Matt. I take it that Jim's run off."

McClusky continued doggedly and with rising voice, "Me an' Jim have a deal on, I told you! We're—!"

"Sure," Les interrupted. "Of course. I'll hold things down while you're gone. Good luck, Matt. Plenty of it. Lots of good luck for you and Jim."

Old man McClusky gave his ranch yard one long last look and rode east toward the Cordellia Mountains, which was a great, jagged pile of sunburned rock that stretched north and south for forty miles. There was no chance of overtaking the boy before he got to Spider Roost, so Matt set a methodical pace that was easy on both him and the horse. Both he and the horse must have plenty left on the morrow.

When darkness came Matt was a mile into the mountains. Here he camped and ate a cold supper and spent the night. Morning and he was on the move again. The going became rougher and rougher. Many times he had to walk beside the horse, urging his mount on with soft words and the quick slap of his open hand.

Midmorning and he crossed the floor of a wide canyon and rode directly toward a sheer wall of multi-colored rock. Apparently there was no conceivable way for a man or beast to scale that wall, yet years before Matt McClusky had stumbled upon the secret, which was the secret of Spider Roost. Only when a man came within a yard of it could he see the entrance, so cleverly had nature concealed it with a multiplicity of blending colors. It was really not an entrance at all but a concealed trail that ran up through a crooked fissure.

McClusky dismounted and, pulling his horse behind him, struggled up

the steep incline. He came to the top, badly winded. Matt rested here. Before him lay the beginning of Spider Roost. It was an oblong depression. There was grass and water and scrub oak. It was an oasis in a wilderness of rock. McClusky looked at it with pleasure. This was perhaps the last time he would ever look on such a pleasant sight.

When Matt had recovered his wind he started down into the basin, following hoofprints that showed in the grass. A quarter of a mile away he saw a thin column of smoke corkscrewing up into the air. Which, of course, meant that someone was there.

A hundred yards he walked and a man with drawn guns stepped out suddenly from behind a bush.

"All right!" the man said savagely. "Lift 'em!"

Matt McClusky lost no time dropping his horse's reins and hoisting his open hands up level with his shoulders. It was a hard faced, bitter edged young man who stood in the trail before him.

"Friend," Matt said, "you got nothin' to fear from me. I'm lookin' for the Socorro Kid. I want to talk to him."

The outlaw spat and asked not too wisely, "How the hell did you know he was here?"

"There's talk of it in the valley," McClusky replied patiently. He forced a smile. "I reckon, young fella, there's few men livin' who know where the Spider Roost is. I'm one of 'em. An' here's another thing. I'm Matt McClusky. My son Jim's here with Socorro. Where my boy rides, so do I. That's why I've come. You may not know it, but I'm one of you."

A STONISHMENT showed on the young outlaw's face. "Well, I'll be damned," he said finally. "I'll pull your guns. You walk ahead of me. We'll see what Socorro's got to say."

Matt McClusky lowered his hands, picked up his horse's reins and following the uncertain path continued down into the hollow of the basin.

A moment and the outlaw who walked behind him called out loudly: "It's O.K., Socorro! I'm bringin' in a gent!"

They stepped into a small clearing beside a pool, which was the outlaw

camp. Three men stood there and Jim was one of them. At sight of his father the boy turned white. His mouth opened, his lower lip sagged.

"Mornin', Jim," old Matt said. "I had kind of a hunch I'd find you here. Of course it was just a hunch but your old man's kinda good at puttin' things together."

The boy made no answer and Matt McClusky prayed that his son would continue to keep his mouth shut. Matt looked around. The three outlaws were all in their twenties; there were few oldtimers in the outlaw business. He had no trouble picking out the Socorro Kid for he was easily the dominant one, a swaggering bully, with the face of a rat and the eyes of a wolf. The old man held out his hand to him.

"I'm Matt McClusky, Jim's father. Seein' the boy's turned hoot-owler, I thought I would too. I'm joinin' up with you."

The Socorro Kid ignored the proffered hand. His face hardened, his eyes blazed with fury. "How the devil did you know I was here?" He did not wait for an answer, but turned on young Jim. "You musta talked! You damned—!"

Death lurked in Socorro's eyes. The air was like ice.

Old Matt knew this was a crucial moment. That his boy's life hung by the merest thread. "Socorro," he said calmly, "you're wrong about Jim talkin'. I'm an old sort of a guy an' I've learned to read men. I knew Jim was gettin' restless an' up to somethin'. An' I knew you were holed in here somewhere. And remember that I've lived around here ever since I was a button. Years ago I found the way to Spider Roost but I've kept it under my hat. Mebbe the day'd come when I'd wanta hole in here myself—"

Some of the tension came out of Socorro. He smiled crookedly.

He's as cruel as a cougar, Matt thought.

"Don't see how you'd figger all this out yourself," Socorro complained.

The two remaining outlaws nodded their agreement. Young Jim McClusky still stood there as gray as death.

"It wasn't so hard," Matt explained. "You've pulled three-four jobs down in the valley. The word's got around

that it was you. The sheriff's been lookin' for you but he can't find you. Why? Because you're a smart man, Socorro. Because you've got a head. You know things. I figgered you'd know about Spider Roost. I figgered that was the reason the sheriff couldn't find you. Mister, you're smart."

He watched the Socorro Kid respond to this flattery, he watched another smile come to the outlaw's twisted mouth.

"I know my way around," Socorro admitted. "But I'm still plumb puzzled. You've got a ranch down in the valley, makin' money. This moonshine of you wantin' to join us—"

Matt McClusky had a quick answer for this. "People think I'm makin' money. But that ain't the half of it. I'll be broke flatter'n a pancake come six months. Listen, Socorro. This's somethin' I've always had an itch to do. Now I'm doin' it."

"Can't see what good an old goat like you'd be to me."

McClusky forced a laugh. "Good to you!" he exclaimed. "Why I know everybody in the valley. There ain't a secret there I don't know. Who's got money an' where."

THE SOCORRO KID came quickly to a decision. He was noted for quick decisions. For deciding a matter of life in the twinkling of an eye. "Bill," he said to the man who'd brought Matt into camp, "give the old gent back his guns. We'll give him one chance to make good. Just one. An' we'll keep an eye on him all the time."

So Matt McClusky got back his .45s and shoved them in his holsters. He saw his son breathing easier, yet dread and worry and embarrassment still showed on the youth's face.

"We'll cook some grub," Socorro announced. "Then we'll talk turkey."

Matt unsaddled his horse and contrived to be alone with Jim and slightly apart from the others.

"You're crazy, Pa," the boy whispered. "What's got into you?"

"If you're good enough to ride with a bunch like this, I reckon I am. That makes sense, don't it? You're my son."

"Like hell it does! If Socorro finds out about that note I left—"

"I'll not tell him. I burned the note."

Jim McClusky's eyes were blazing. "You oughta be ashamed of yourself, Pa!"

"Ashamed of myself," Matt McClusky repeated. "That's a good one. How about you bein' ashamed. What's good enough for you oughta be good enough for me."

The boy stalked away, trembling with anger.

Old Matt helped with the cooking and in general made himself useful. He learned that Socorro's companions were named Bill Stevens and Hank O'Toole. Both these men continued to eye him suspiciously.

"I wish you birds wouldn't look at me that way," Matt complained. "Remember, the sheriff would've paid plenty for what I knew. But I ain't that kind of a guy."

"Aw, shut up!" Hank O'Toole grumbled.

"I wish you an' your kid was outta here," Bill Stevens said.

"Cut out this hagglin'!" Socorro ordered. "Come on. We'll eat."

Matt McClusky managed it so that he sat slightly apart with his son.

"Socorro's a fine guy," Matt observed from the corner of his mouth. "A swell fella."

"Sure," Jim answered. "I told you—"

"Kind to widows an' orphans—"

"What was that?" Socorro interrupted.

"Nothin' much," Matt mumbled. "I was just tellin' my kid how lucky we was to be hooked up with such a fine guy as you."

As they ate Matt McClusky saw his boy suffer from mortification and worry, which was what he had hoped for. Young Jim McClusky had obviously never expected anything like this to happen.

They finished eating and sat at the edge of the pool, smoking. The air was tense, uncomfortable.

"Well, Matt," the Socorro Kid asked finally, "what's on your mind? You boasted of knowin' things that we could use. Name one of 'em."

MATT LOOKED at his son before he answered, looked hard at him and hoped that something of what

was really in his mind would find its way into the boy's brain.

"There's somethin' good down in the valley," Matt said. "There's a ranch called the Rafter B F. It's owned by old lady Wrackfield. Mrs. Tillie Wrackfield—"

Matt McClusky was still watching his son. He saw a look of horror come into Jim's face. Mrs. Tillie Wrackfield was one of their neighbors, a fine old lady, partly crippled and well thought of by everyone.

"We have nothin' to do with women," Jim interrupted. "We don't rob 'em or harm 'em."

Socorro stood up. His face darkened. "You keep your face shut!" he snarled at the boy. "What you buttin' in for!" The outlaw's fingers were near his gun butts. It looked for a moment as though he would draw.

"Don't mind my son," Matt put in hastily. "He ain't dry behind the ears yet. He don't know what this is all about. We're goin' to get our money where we find it and it don't matter a damn who has it. Ain't that so, Socorro? Ain't that the way any hoot-owl rider does it?"

Socorro nodded. "You said a mouthful, mister. Go on."

"Well," the elder McClusky continued, "Tillie Wrackfield don't believe in banks. She lost pretty heavily once when a bank closed up on her. Tillie keeps her cash around the house and she keeps plenty of it. Gold and silver. No paper money for her."

The Socorro Kid swore profanely. "Sounds interestin'—"

Once again Matt looked at the boy. Jim squirmed restlessly. There was a flush now on his cheeks.

"We hadn't oughta hurt an old lady like her," Jim McClusky said thickly.

"Why you—!" Socorro began, and Matt thought for sure that his son would die.

"Forget about the boy," Matt pleaded. "Just forget about him. It'll take time for him to learn what the high trail business really is. He's got some high an' mighty notions now. But he'll get over 'em. Give him time an' he'll make a good hand."

Socorro quieted down, relaxed, though avarice burned in his eyes like fire. "Where does the old gal keep her cash?" he asked.

Matt shrugged and moistened his dry lips. "That's somethin' I don't know, but if we handle it right we can sure find out. She's workin' the ranch short handed now. What hands she's got are repairin' fences. If we was to show up there about nine o'clock tomorrow mornin' chances are a thousand to one that we'd find her alone."

Socorro grunted in satisfaction. "You got somethin' there, Matt. How much do you reckon we'll find around the house?"

"I'd say a couple thousand," McClusky replied. "Mebbe more."

"We'll cover our trail," Socorro said. "Mebbe we can make it look as though the old woman died of heart failure or somethin'. You knowin' her'll make it easy for us to get in. She won't suspect nothin' until we start to work on her."

Matt nodded. "Sure. That's the way we'll handle it. We oughta get down from here before dark. Stake out near the ranch an' be on hand there in the mornin'. We can watch the hired help ride away and then move in."

"Absolutely," Socorro said. Then: "We'll ride," he ordered. "Matt, you an' your kid'll ride ahead."

Shortly they saddled and rode away from Spider Roost. For the first mile or more after they got down into the canyons McClusky ignored his son, then, when it happened that the three outlaws had dropped back a considerable distance, he moved his horse over closer to the boy's and spoke to him.

"How do you like it, Jim? How do you like this life?"

Jim McClusky blazed with anger. "What'd you tell him about Mrs. Wrackfield for? That was a skunk's trick!"

"To show you," Matt explained, "what a fine man the Socorro Kid is. He filled you full of a lot of hot air about never robbin' anything but banks and express shipments. You fell for it. But you see how quick he jumped to the bait when there was a defenseless widder woman dangled in front of him. Socorro ain't got any more morals'n a coyote. An' that goes for O'Toole an' Bill Stevens too. An' it'll go for you, if you ride with these hyenas for another month."

"I won't do it," Jim murmured from

between his teeth. "Damned if I'll help rob an' murder an old lady."

"Neither will I," Matt answered.

"But, by thunder, Pa, it was you who suggested it!"

"Sure," old man McClusky admitted. "Why? Just to show you what you're in for when you ride with skunks. One of these days you'll think no more of it than Socorro does."

McClusky knew from the boy's expression that a great light was dawning inside Jim's head.

"If we don't go through with this," Jim said simply, "we'll have Socorro and the other two to fight."

"That's what I'm goin' to do," Matt replied. "I'm goin' to fight."

The old man saw moisture in young McClusky's eyes. "That's what you figgered to do all along, Pa. An' you knew you wouldn't stand one chance in a million. Just to show me what a jackass I was makin' of myself while there was still time for me to change."

Matt felt his son drawing to him though they were physically no closer. They rounded a bend in the gorge. The canyon opened out. The broad valley lay beyond.

"None of these men have any right to live," old man McClusky said. "There's blood on the hands of all three of 'em."

"We can turn an' take 'em by surprise," Jim suggested. "Get at least one of 'em before they know what's up."

BUT MATT shook his head. "We're not drygulchers. I'm not takin' unfair advantage of a man who gave me back my guns. Not even a rat like Socorro. If we go out, it'll be like men."

Jim McClusky agreed. "There're some boulders ahead—"

"You let me do the talkin'," Matt interrupted. "When the shootin' starts, move faster'n you ever moved before."

When Matt came up to the boulders he stopped his horse and slid from the saddle. Jim did the same. Socorro and his two men came up.

"What's the matter?" Socorro asked.

"Climb down," Matt replied. "I

want to palaver with you. With all three of you."

"Socorro," Matt began, "me and my boy've decided to have no more truck with you. I was just funnin' about the Widow Wrackfield. She went up yesterday to Denver to visit an' won't be back for a month. She's got her money with her! Socorro, you ain't fit to live! To be—"

Matt McClusky did not finish the sentence. The Socorro Kid had gone for his guns! Matt jumped to one side and, as he moved, pulled his own .45s. His guns blazed. A slug hit him. Half turned him. The canyon jumped to the crash of burning powder. Five men. Ten guns. They were all firing!

Old man McClusky hadn't been in a gun fight in years. Yet he knew, instantly, that he'd forgotten none of his old-time cunning. There was small chance of success. Not with those odds—

A split second and Matt was in among the boulders. Blood ran down his shirt. Jim was beside him. The boy had been hit. He was dragging his left leg.

Socorro and Stevens and Hank O'Toole came charging in. It was their mistake. O'Toole was the first to go. A slug between his eyes. From that point on old man McClusky knew little of what happened. Another slug hit him. He was moving, reloading, firing. Jim was down. He stood over him. Emptied his gun at Socorro. Vaguely he saw the master outlaw doubled like a knife. Fall forward.

Suddenly there was no more firing. The canyon quieted strangely as echoes faded in the distance. Swiftly, Matt passed from one to another of the three men. There was no life in any of them. He went back to Jim. The boy was sitting up, gritting his teeth, straightening his broken leg.

"We were lucky, son," Matt said. "Your leg'll heal. My three scratches aren't anything."

Jim held out his hand to his father, tried to speak.

"Don't say it," Matt grumbled. "It weren't nothin'. Nobody'll ever know—but you an' me."

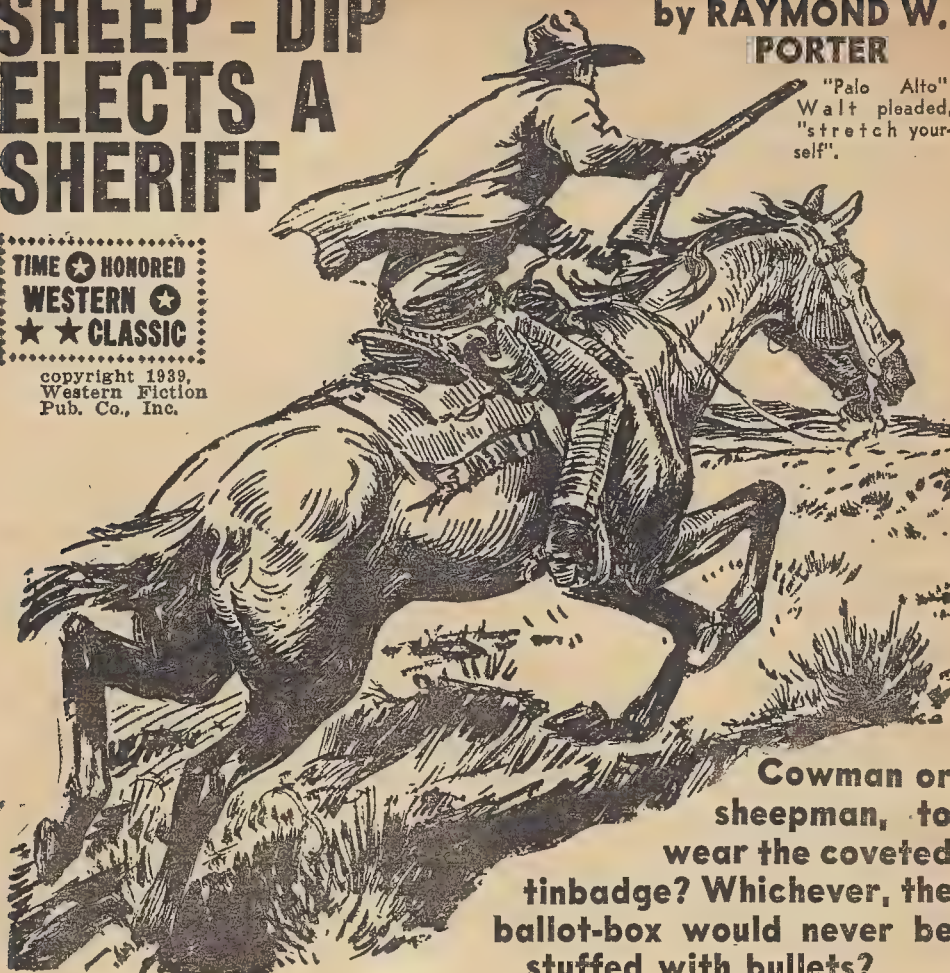
"I got a better way of thankin' you'n talkin'," Jim McClusky said. "I'm goin' home." ●END

SHEEP - DIP ELECTS A SHERIFF

by RAYMOND W.
PORTER

TIME ★ HONORED
WESTERN ★
★ ★ CLASSIC

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**Cowman or
sheepman, to
wear the coveted
tinbadge? Whichever, the
ballot-box would never be
stuffed with bullets?**

PACING about in a small pole corral, Watt Galloway expounded upon his qualifications as a candidate for sheriff of Bell County.

"I'm just a cowpuncher, folks," he said, throwing his huge arms outward in a gesture of complete frankness. "But I've got what it takes to hold down this sheriffin' job. I'll see to it that saloons' and gamblin' joints are run square and decent. All killin's will have to be open and above-board. Murderin' and hoss-stealin' will strictly not be put up with!"

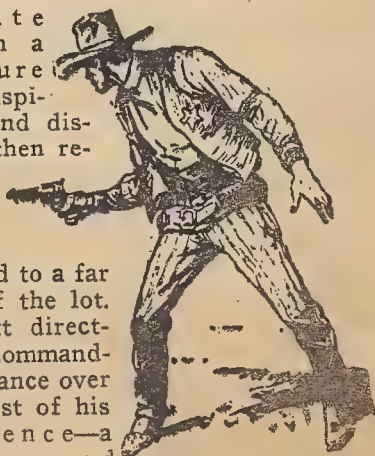
His face—large, deeply rutted, and sagging at the jaws—grew stern. He paused and looked at his audience as though for encouragement. None came. He frowned.

"Get back there in that corral!" he said sharply.

He waved his arms at two fuzzy roan brons that were making a sneak for the gate. They stopped and looked at the candidate with a mixture of suspicion and disgust, then re-

treated to a far end of the lot.

Watt directed a commanding glance over the rest of his audience—a sleepy-eyed



yearling, a fat heifer coily chewing her cud, and three lean old cows awaiting transfer to the feeding pasture. Perched in the shade of a pepper tree near the gate were a half dozen heat-weary hens. A few ducks waddled about the watering trough, casting an appraising eye now and then at the political gathering.

"What is the issue of this campaign?" Watt demanded.

The two horses resigned themselves to nibbling at each other's shoulders.

"The issue of this campaign is clear cut," the speaker declared, pointing an arresting finger at the coy little heifer. "Either you elect me or you elect a sheep-herder! And if you elect him, Bell county is goin' to be turned over to sheepmen!"

"Ba-a-a-a!" came the plaintive bleat of a goat, which had approached the corral curiously.

Watt stiffened like a man who has unexpectedly heard the voice of a mortal enemy. He whirled and stared with narrowing eyes at the bewiskered heckler.

"Bah, yourself!" he shouted. "I've got a good mind to bust you with a pole!"

The goat gazed through the bars, wrinkled his nose, chewed placidly a few times, and repeated, "Ba-a-a!"

Watt picked up a stick and hurled it at the interloper. The goat turned and scampered back toward the ranch house.

THE CANDIDATE for sheriff of Bell county turned to his audience and tried to pick up the threads of his broken discourse. For days he had been practicing faithfully in preparation for the opening rally of the campaign scheduled for the following day at Sheep Dip, the stronghold of the sheepmen, in the southern part of the county. Another interruption came.

"What have you been doin' to Tony, pa?"

Watt's heavy jaws came together. Again he turned toward the ranch house.

A girl was walking towards the corral. The goat was trotting at her side, his senile features twisted in a smirk.

"Look," said the girl, accusingly. She grasped the goat by the whiskers and lifted the animal's head. "He came

running up to the house just now, scared to death. And he's got a skinned place on his nose."

"I," said Watt portentously, "put the skinned place on his nose. With that stick right there."

"Why, pa!"

"He's a mighty lucky goat, not to have more'n a skinned nose. Some of these days I'm goin' to bust his head in. I ought to have done it a long time ago. Me! Watt Galloway, candidate for sheriff of Bell county on the cattlemen's ticket, keepin' a can-eatin', carcass-smellin' thing like that around my house! It's enough to beat me in the 'lection."

"If you ever bust Tony's head," said the girl, "I'll break Palo Alto's leg, and I'll cut the head off your wild turkey gobbler, and I'll pull the feathers out of your geese, and—"

"That'll do," said her father.

Man and daughter glared at each other through the poles of the corral. The goat chewed attentively. The broncs ceased nibbling and looked about with more interest than they had shown in the campaign speech.

"Sometimes," said Watt, "I think you ain't no daughter of mine!"

"Sometimes," flashed the girl, "I wish I wasn't!"

Watt flinched. He moistened his thick lips. His jaws sagged lower than usual.

The girl impulsively thrust her hands through the bars. "I didn't mean it, pa," she said contritely.

Watt fumbled for the small hands. "I know you didn't, kid," he said. All of his bombastic speech-making manner was gone. All of his anger was suddenly congealed. He looked awkward and lugubrious.

"You know why I love Tony, pa," the girl said, not in explanation, but in renewal of an old, old plea. "Rell gave him to me, pa. You're not forgetting that?"

"And I'm not forgettin' you give Rell Shepard the finest calf I ever had, either. After I had give it to you."

"We exchanged gifts, our best things, that was all. That was two years ago. It was a pledge, a promise that we made ourselves to keep on trying to make both sides see how foolish it is to keep fighting."

"You don't have to go all over that again," Watt said, wearily. "I'm a cowman. Always have been, always will be. That goat smells just like all the rest of 'em to me. And as for Rell Shepard"—his voice grew hard—"that son of sheep-herder, I ain't got much more use for him than I have for that goat there!"

The girl drew back. Her eyes were gray, steady, and fearless, like her father's. Her features resembled his, minus adipose tissue and corrugated skin. Her nose was short and rounded. Her chin was like his first one, dimpled daintily. Her cheeks were full, and tanned.

"You're just pig-headed," she declared hotly. "Sheepmen have got just as much right in this county as cattlemen!"

"That'll do!" roared Watt. "Get on back in the house, or I'll use this stick on you. And it won't be your nose I'll skin, either."

CHERRIE GALLOWAY turned with all the dignity of eighteen years in deepest scorn, ignoring the threat of corporeal punishment. Tony went a little ahead of her, not so scornful of the stick, but manifesting considerable dignity, nevertheless, and uttering a satisfied "Ba-a-a" of vindication.

Headed by Watt, six cowmen rode sedately through the winding street of Sheep Dip, flanked by adobe hovels with palmleaf remadas. Dogs rushed out at them from all sides. Some children stuck out their tongues and made noises which brought forth "shuses" from their parents, intermingled with snickers.

In a corner saloon, a hilarious electorate was getting steamed up to yell for the candidates they had already made up their minds to vote for, and to dare anybody to convince them they were wrong.

The cow contingent, admirably aloof, rode through the town and out to the rally grounds. A man came out to the hitchrack where they were tying their horses.

"Welcome, gents," he said. "Cantwell is my name. I'm chairman of the barbecue committee. We've got places reserved for you boys at the speakers' table."

Cantwell was a slender, black-eyed man with a little mustache and a big smirk. Watt and his friends followed him through the crowd. They looked about for neighbors and acquaintances, but the crowd was made up entirely of the sheep faction.

"Stick together till after we've et," Watt whispered. "Then we'll feel somewhat better."

He sat down at the speakers' table facing the crowd, flanked by his companions. Jim Balkhide, tall, bony, and stern, sat on his right. Balkhide was Watt's nearest neighbor and staunchest supporter in the campaign.

"Ain't that Cherrie over there?" Balkhide asked.

Watt saw that it was Cherrie, all right—one bright spot in a drably garbed, predominately masculine gathering. She wore a pink dress, her best. At her side was a tall, bare-headed youth, wearing a white shirt open at the collar.

"I told her she couldn't come!" Watt fumed.

It had been a four hours' ride, and Watt knew she hadn't come to hear his speech. She had come to be with Rell Shepard, donor of the hated goat, and son of Hank Shepard, who was running against Watt for sheriff.

Watt glared across the crowd at his daughter. She was laughing, apparently oblivious to her father.

"Better be thinkin' about your speech," Balkhide advised. "You can 'tend to your daughter when you get home."

Watt grew cold beneath the mid-day summer sun. He couldn't remember a word of his speech. He began moving his lips to encourage the formation of words. He hadn't wanted to come to Sheep Dip to make a speech, in the first place. He had declared stoutly he was not going to solicit the vote of any sheepman.

But the county political organization had commanded him to appear at this the opening rally of the campaign. And Balkhide had told him he must go or people might get the idea he had stayed away through timidity.

Big platters of barbecue sandwiches were being placed on the table. Hungry people were filling their mouths, stifling their talk and laughter. Dogs were barking and begging.

Watt reached absently for a sandwich. He took a big bite and began to chew slowly. The meat was juicy and tender. He gave up the struggle with his speech and resigned himself to the pleasure of the moment.

AFTER A fleeting, soul-satisfying instant, doubt crept into his half-closed eyes. He stopped chewing. His big flat nose twitched. He lifted the top slice of bread and smelled of the meat. He replaced the bread and cast a side glance at Balkhide, who was chewing on his first bite in a slow uncertain manner.

"Sheep!" hissed Watt.

Balkhide gulped his bite down. "Maybe it's veal," he whispered hopefully.

Watt was paling slightly. "Don't you think I know sheep when I smell it? I've had a goat under my nose for the past two years."

He looked down the line at his companions on the left.

"Sheep!" He spat the hated word out of the corner of his mouth.

Some nodded, noses crinkling at the despised odor. Others stared unbelievably at the offending slices of mutton. They had been very hungry after four hours in the saddle.

Watt was rising.

"Where you goin'?" Balkhide asked.

"I'm insulted, ain't I?" Watt asked coldly.

Balkhide looked uneasily about. On every hand people were eating ravenously and with every indication of pleasure, evidently oblivious to the consternation of the cattlemen.

"I don't think so," Balkhide said. "They're treated us right hospitable, accordin' to their own notions. They don't think anything about eatin' sheep, and maybe they don't know how us cowmen feel about it."

Watt glared at the other diners. His eyes fell upon his daughter. His own daughter—pretty, pink, and happy. Nibbling daintily on a mutton sandwich!

Watt wagged his head in a dazed manner. He closed his eyes and sank back on the bench. Balkhide placed a sympathetic hand on his arm.

"Buck up, old timer," he said. "You've had a lot of hard knocks in

your life. Don't let this get you down!"

Again Watt shook his heavy head. "I won't," he said. "I won't."

"Eat the bread and act like you're havin' a good time," Balkhide advised.

Watt chewed glumly on two slices of bread, after dropping the mutton beneath the table. A dog made a dive for the discarded meat and gulped it down.

The other cowmen followed the lead of their candidate, surreptitiously discarding the mutton and chewing on the remaining bread.

When everybody had finished eating, Cantwell arose and hammered on the table with a gavel made from the hub and one spoke of a buckboard wheel.

"Gents!" he shouted, "this is a Red Letter day for Sheep Dip!"

The crowd was subsiding, rolling cigarettes, biting points on matches to use for tooth-picks.

"You've seen a sight today no sheepman ever seen before!" the chairman of the barbecue committee went on.

Silence gripped the crowd. The speaker paused dramatically, then stretched an arm toward the end of the table at which the cowmen were sitting.

"You've seen a bunch of cow waddies eatin' mutton barbecue!" he finished triumphantly.

THERE WAS a moment's stunned silence. Then wild cheers rang out. Taunting "Ba-a-a's" were heard. Laughs and jeers.

It took some time for the cattlemen to realize that the entire affair had been planned to humiliate them.

Cantwell held up his hand for silence. "Of course," he added "these ain't true cowmen or they'd never eat mutton. They come here to try to get your votes, and they were two-faced enough to do anything, even to makin' you think they liked mutton!"

Watt jumped up. "You're a liar!" he shouted. "I never et no sheep!"

He made a dive for the master of ceremonies. The crowd surged forward, leaping tables and overturned benches. The little group of cattlemen became the center of a turbulent whirlpool of humanity.

Watt was bellowing, "I come down here to"—he smashed an ubiquitous sheepherder on the jaw—"to tell you goat-stinkin', louse-breedin', dog-call-in', shag-eared woolies"—thud! Somebody sent a fist into the puff of fat beneath his right ear—"shag-eared woolies that I don't want your damned votes"—he ducked two simultaneous blows and rammed his head into a convenient abdomen—"and I won't count 'em if you cast 'em for me!"

It was a true democratic rally. Every man was permitted an equal share on the proceedings, if he could get close enough to the speakers' table. And if he couldn't, he could start a fight wherever he happened to be without much trouble.

The sheriff, Lem Downey, and his deputies, waded into the fray, shouting official condemnation, pleading for peace, and threatening to throw everybody in jail. Downey had served as sheriff of Bell county for twenty years, and was voluntarily withdrawing from the position and the eternal quarrel between sheep and cattle men.

One of the cowboys had brought a gun. He pulled it. Watt saw the move and shouted, "Buck, put up that hog-leg! If you ain't man enough to lick a bunch of sheepherders with your fists, you ought to get licked!"

As Watt paused to shout this warning, Cantwell saw the opportunity for which he had been waiting. He hit the cowman a direct blow with the wheel hub. Watt went down and out.

At the same time, some one swung a bench and knocked out the man with the gun. Three sheepmen were working Balkhide over, and they had just about finished their work. The other cowboys were faring equally as bad.

Cherrie was trying to push her way through the melee. Rell Shepard was trying to drag her away from it.

The girl encountered a tall motionless figure that barred her progress without being aware of her presence. All others in that crowd were pushing about or shouting. This man stood perfectly still, tall enough to see over the heads of those about him.

Cherrie pounded him in the back with her fists. "Get out of the way!"

He turned. He was a lean gray solemn man. His eyes were hard and clear.

"This is all your fault, Hank Shepard!" Cherrie cried.

She tried to push past, but he barred her way purposely now. "You're liable to get hurt," he said gruffly. "Take her out of this, Rell."

"That's what I'm trying to do," shouted Rell above the noise.

Cherrie swung on him furiously. "Take your hands off me, you—you sheepherder! I'm goin' to help my pa!"

She jerked away, eluded the elder Shepard, and wormed her way through the tightly jammed circle of men.

RELL SHOOK off his father's restraining arm and fought his way into the crowd. A drunken spectator, disappointed because he had been unable to get into the main fracas, took exception to the jab in the ribs young Shepard gave him in an effort to push him aside. There was a brief tussle, and Rell went on, leaving his opponent to slide to the ground, the victim of a short quick punch to the jaw.

Cherrie was on the ground beside her father. There was no mistaking the fact that Watt's injuries had not been fatal. His mouth was open and torn clothing belied the appearance of a fat weary man taking his mid-day siesta.

The remaining ex-combatants likewise resting or being held powerless under the supervision of the sheriff and his men.

"Bring me some water," said Cherrie, punching the nearest leg.

Rell turned toward a table but as he did so a pitcher of water was thrown in Watt's face. This had little effect on him, but a piece of mutton held under his nose turned the trick. He sat up, sputtering.

Gradually, the cowmen were revived and escorted from the rally grounds by the sheriff and his deputies. As Watt and his friends headed for the northern part of the county and their homes, the candidate held his head and groaned each time his horse made a mis-step.

"I made my speech, anyhow," he said. "The main part of it, at least. I told 'em to go to hell."

Throughout the summer, Watt doggedly stumped the county. He ended

every speech with the ringing declaration, "And I never et no sheep!" But a skeptical snickering electorate was hard to convince.

The day before election Watt and Balkhide, squatting on their heels against the corral fence, gave each other large doses of consolation.

"Looks bad," said Balkhide.

"Reckon I'm beat," agreed Watt.

"It was a dirty sheepherder trick," said Balkhide, "and there ought to be some way to get even."

"You've done all you could, Jim," Watt said glumly. "Gettin' them to name your place a votin' precinct ought to help some. A lot of folks around here will go up to your place to vote, where they wouldn't ride clean into town."

Palo Alto, a long-legged sorrel, thrust his head through the bars of the corral and nosed Watt's sombrero sympathetically.

"You've got a lot of friends, Watt," said Balkhide, "if most of 'em has got long ears and don't understand your campaign speeches."

Watt's jaws came together sharply. "I admit I practiced my speeches before I got up to say 'em. I ain't no public speaker and I needed the practice. Besides," he added bitterly, "Palo Alto here and a lot of these other critters have got a lot more sense than a raft of voters I know."

"Sure they have," said Balkhide. "Too bad we can't vote 'em."

THEY EXCHANGED sidelong glances. Balkhide straightened and began whistling through his teeth. With a stick, Watt began making circles on the ground and drawing crosses inside them.

"What's your duties as judge of your precinct, anyhow?" Watt asked.

"All I got to do is drop the ballots in the box and make a little mark on a tally sheet, they tell me. I don't know nothin' about it."

"The more marks you put on that tally sheet, and the more ballots that goes in that box, the more votes I get. That's the general idea, ain't it?"

"Uh, huh," said Balkhide. "I reckon everybody up here will vote for you, Watt."

Again they exchanged glances.

"We got a right to take the votes they double-crossed us out of!" Balkhide said. "That's no more than fair."

"That's the way I look at it," Watt agreed.

"But what about young Shepard? He's been named inspector at your precinct, to look after his paw's interests."

Watt made a row of circles and carefully drew circles in each of them. In the heat of the campaign he had forgotten minor unpleasantness, like the love affair between his daughter and the son of his opponent. And Cherrie hadn't mentioned Rell Shepard to him since the day of the barbecue.

Suddenly, Watt's nose crinkled, and he looked up. Tony, the goat, was cautiously approaching the corral watering trough. Watt started to throw the stick he held, but changed his mind and made a long cross in the dirt.

"Cherrie thinks a heap of that goat," he murmured. "Once it got sick and she rode all the way to Sheep Dip to get Rell Shepard to come and doctor it."

There was a short silence. Watt's fat face creased with a beatific smile as the full genius of the idea swept over him.

"If Tony got sick and Cherrie sent for young Shepard, there'd be nobody but you and me left to guard the ballot box," he said. "Reckon we could look after it?"

Balkhide's grimness vanished. "For once in this here campaign, Watt," he said, "you furnished something in the way of a real idea!"

It was two hours before time for the polls to close. Watt and Balkhide sat on the veranda at the latter's ranch house, near the voting booth. Near them, but quietly aloof, sat Rell Shepard.

"Here comes somebody in a big hurry to vote," remarked Balkhide, squinting at a rider coming at a run.

"Looks like Cherrie!" said Watt. "Wonder what's happened?"

He and Balkhide arose and walked out into the yard. Cherrie's horse slid to a stop. The girl jumped from the saddle, ran past Watt and Balkhide toward Rell, who sprang to his feet

and came forward to meet her.

For a moment they faced each other without speaking. "Rell, oh Rell!" Cherrie gulped. And went into his arms.

"Hell, oh hell!" muttered Watt, turning away.

"I'm sorry I—said what I did!" said Cherrie.

"It was all my fault!" said Rell.

Watt looked at Balkhide wonderingly. He didn't understand this talk.

"Oh, Rell!" Cherrie exclaimed, suddenly. "I nearly forgot. Tony's sick. You must come and see what you can do for him."

After they had gone Watt kept shaking his head. "Sounded like they had busted up. And I brought 'em back together again! Kick me, Jim. Kick me plumb around the house!"

BUT BALKHIDE was cheerfully busy. "Horny Herford has voted," he said, casting a ballot into the box and making a check mark on his tally sheet. "Bull Whiteface has voted... Ben Gelding has voted... Red Domin-ecker has voted... Turk Gobler has voted..."

Six o'clock came. Rell Shepard had not returned. As inspector of the precinct, it was his duty to assist in counting the ballots and to take charge of the ballot box afterwards.

"The sheriff said we didn't have to bring the ballot box to town tonight, anyhow," Balkhide said. "All they want right now is the tally sheet."

"We'll take the ballot box by my place and turn it over to young Shepard," said Watt, "and then hightail into town with the tally sheet."

At Watt's place they found Rell and Cherrie administering to a very sick goat.

"What's the matter with him?" Watt asked affably.

"Must have eaten something that didn't agree with him," said Rell, giving Watt a speculative look.

"What can a goat eat that don't agree with him?" scoffed Balkhide, and quickly changed the subject. "Here's the ballot box. Count 'em if you want to."

And he and Watt rode for town in very high spirits. The courthouse, where the returns were being tab-

ulated, was jammed. Three men, including Sheriff Downey, sat at a long table in the county clerk's office with tabulation sheets stacked in front of them.

"We've got all the returns in except your precinct," the sheriff told Balkhide. "We'll have the final count now in a minute."

Balkhide and Watt stood back and waited expectantly, exchanging brief mutually contemptuous glances across the room with Hank Shepard and the man Cantwell, who had engineered the diabolical barbecue.

The sheriff unfolded the tabulation sheet, glanced along the row of penciled marks made by Balkhide. "Watt Galloway, eighty," he said. "Hank Shepard, none." He passed the sheet to the county clerk.

"Eighty votes!" Cantwell exclaimed. "Why, there's not but thirty votes in that precinct!"

Watt looked at Balkhide and found him staring blankly into the opposition camp. "The hell there ain't! Maybe I don't know how to count!"

"You know how to count, all right—when you're countin' for your man!"

The sheriff spoke. "Were the ballots counted in the presence of the inspector?"

"N-no," said Balkhide. "But he's got 'em, and you can count 'em if you want to."

The county clerk arose from the table and took down a large book from a nearby shelf. The gold letters on the binding glared in Watt's eyes:

"REGISTERED VOTERS,
BELL COUNTY."

Watt was astonished and dismayed. He had no idea that such a record was kept. He turned accusing eyes on his alleged friend and political adviser, and found Balkhide looking at the county clerk as though the latter were the Angel Gabriel with the book of final accounting.

"There are only thirty voters registered in that precinct," said the clerk. "Of course, maybe we didn't get 'em all, seein' as this is the first time we've registered 'em."

"I charge these men with fraud!" exclaimed Cantwell.

IT WAS finally decided there was only one way to settle the dispute.

Get the ballot box and count the ballots carefully.

"If there are thirty ballots in it, all right," said the sheriff. "If there are eighty—well, we've never had no ballot-box stuffin' in this county that I know of. It'd go pretty hard on anybody who'd try it."

Watt Galloway began edging toward the door. He realized that he had to get hold of that ballot box before the sheriff did. "I'll—go get the box," he said.

The sheriff arose. "And I'll go right along with you."

Watt paused but a moment, then slipped out of the door.

"Stop 'im!" shouted Cantwell.

But Watt was ploughing his way through the crowded corridor. Outside, he ran down the steps and jumped on his horse. Behind him arose blood-chilling shouts. He put spurs to his mount.

Let them shout. Let them accuse him, or think what they pleased. They would have no evidence if he could reach the ballot box first!

"Palo Alto," he pleaded, "stretch yourself!"

Palo Alto stretched himself, carrying Watt through the moonlight over the familiar road at a mile-eating pace. Hoofs pounded behind. The shouting died. A pistol spoke authoritatively. Watt leaned forward in a forlorn attempt to flatten himself upon his horse's withers.

The horse responded to the whizzing bullets better than he had to spurs and the spoken pleas of his rider. The sound of pursuit grew gradually fainter, but lingered in Watt's ears to remind him that he had but a precious few moments at best.

All hopes of winning the election gone, Watt could only pray now that he might escape disgrace, the penitentiary, or a more violent fate at the hands of an angry electorate.

At last the lights of his ranch house winked reassuringly. If Rell Shepard was still there with the ballot box! For once, Watt was thankful for the charm his daughter exercised over the son of his enemy.

Palo Alto came to a winded stop at the front steps and Watt rolled from the saddle. He ran to the end of the

veranda, where he had left the ballot box. It was not there.

"Cherrie!" he bawled.

From the deep shadows of a nearby grape arbor came the answer. "Dad! What's the matter?"

He turned to the two figures which emerged into the bright moonlight. "Where's that ballot box?" he asked.

"It was right there on the porch," said Rell.

"Sure it was!" exploded Watt. "But where is it now?"

The hoofs that had been faintly pounding in Watt's ears swelled into a roll of thunder. Horsemen filled the yard.

"There he is! Grab 'im. Shoot 'im! String 'im up!"

Above the shouting, the sheriff's voice arose. "I'll take care of this!"

Watt resigned himself to the custody of the sheriff gratefully. For a few hectic uncertain moments, he even longed for the quiet safety of the penitentiary walls he knew would surround him, sooner or later.

"Where is the ballot box?" the sheriff asked.

And that became the general cry. Searchers strode through the house, went through outlying buildings with lanterns, and paced the yard. Hope, the faintest sort of hope, stirred in Watt's pounding chest. Perhaps Rell had counted the ballots, suspected the fraud, and was now protecting him. He would do it, for Cherrie's sake.

"That's mighty funny," said the sheriff. "Mighty funny."

"He's a crook!" said Cantwell. "He ought to be strung up!"

"Another crack like that out of you, and I'll gag you," said the sheriff. "We've got no evidence against Watt—yet."

HE CALLED Rell Shepard. "What happened to that ballot box, Rell?" he demanded.

"I don't know, sheriff. They put it right there on the porch. I didn't touch it. I even forgot all about it. You see, Tony was sick, and then—well, then Cherrie and I started talking—"

"Tony?" asked the sheriff.

"My goat," Cherrie explained.

"Oh! And how's Tony now?"

(please turn to last page)

FOUR IN TOWN

(continued from page 60)

a banging door behind him. The rear door of the bank stood open and the two outlaws were racing down the walk to the stable and their horses, both of them firing hastily at Campbell as they ran.

Campbell rolled over onto his stomach and leveled his pistol. All the hours, days and weeks of practice paid off then. The running men became a pair of whiskey bottles sitting on a rock, and Campbell emptied his pistol as fast as thumb and finger could move. Both men went down.

Campbell jumped up and ran back to the stable. He grabbed his rifle from the frightened Harrison and turned to the two outlaws. One lay still, sprawled across the stable walk. The other sat nearby, moaning softly and rocking back and forth with a hand clasped to his side. Two townsmen came running into the yard with drawn pistols. One of them was Sheriff Johnny Robertson. Behind them a crowd edged cautiously down the alley toward the stable.

"Are you all right, Tom?" Robertson asked. "What's going on? What was Harrison shooting at you for?"

Campbell pointed at the two outlaws. "Holdup," he said. "Harrison was in on it, too."

Robertson looked dumb-struck at Harrison. "I'll be hanged. His own bank."

With the shooting over, the crowd flowed into the yard around the stable. Out of it burst Anne Robertson. She rushed up to Campbell and flung her arms around him. He winced and she stepped back to look at him more closely.

"Oh, Tom," she said. "You're hurt." Her voice became crisp. "You're coming with me. Johnny can take care of things now. You're going to stay at our place until you're well, and I won't hear of anything else."

"It's only a scratch Anne." Campbell said.

"I don't care." Anne's voice softened. "When I heard the shooting I was so worried about you."

A warm happiness filled Campbell and spilled over in a broad smile. She had worried about him; not Harrison, him.

The doctor forced his way into the yard. "Same old shoulder, eh, Tom?" he said. "Looks like it's going to be a real troublemaker for you." The medico glanced around the yard as he placed a bandage over the wound. "But it doesn't seem to slow you down any. Guess you were wrong about that last fall at election time."

Tom nodded and smiled at Anne. "I was wrong about a lot of things, but I guess I'm on the right track now." ● END

TIN-BADGE-BACKED BUSHWHACKER

(cont'd from page 73)

brought a paper from her pocket and handed it to him. "In the midst of all the excitement out there in the street," she said, "I saw Brock Sutton kick a tin can back under the boards of the sidewalk. I didn't think anything of it until later, and then I looked for the can and found this stuffed inside."

"He intended to get the paper and destroy it, later," said Johnny. "But he knew I might have him searched, and he didn't want it found on him. He was clever."

Then, Johnny struck a match and touched it to the paper, and watched the writing melt into a puff of ashes. "Sutton's dead," he told her. "Person-

ally, I'm in favor of letting Pike Kramer keep his secret. He belongs in the hills; Deer Lodge would kill him. And I think he's already paid for his crime, whatever it was. Of course," he added, "if you think it would be wrong not to tell your Dad—"

"Not tell him I know where there's an outlaw hiding in the hills?" she smiled. "It shouldn't trouble my conscience any. I've had too much practice at that sort of thing, the past few days."

"There's a difference, though," he reminded her, taking her in his arms. "Pike Kramer, you see, isn't on the verge of becoming the sheriff's son-in-law!" ● END



Tenbrook fired
hip high
and Borka
folded.

TENBROOK BORROWS BOOTHILL FOR A BUTTON

by ROD PATTERSON

They said that Sheriff Jim Tenbrook and Deputy Tom Brant were a devil of a hard pair to gravesend...

WITH A VAGUE sense of disturbance, Sheriff Jim Tenbrook noticed that there were three strangers slouched against the wall of Solygub's blacksmith shop, as silent and patiently waiting as their dust-powdered ponies, lined along the high-plank walk in front of them. He finished tying his team of glistening matched blacks to the worn hitch rack before his casual glance carried towards the steps of the little dobe jail. And then he saw Hade Borka.

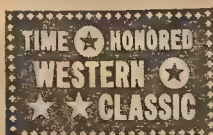
Extreme breadth of shoulder, accentuated by short,

stubby legs, gave the outlaw a squat appearance; his black, taunting eyes held a hard glitter.

He said, "Just a minute, sheriff," as Tenbrook limped up to the bottom step and stopped.

Jim Tenbrook's weathered face remained expressionless; his tall, lean body, with its solid shoulders, showed no sign of the tension that ran through him suddenly. For a bleak instant he stared up at Borka in silence. Then he said, "Step aside, Hade. If yuh wanta talk, come into my office."

Both men knew there was good cause for the strain of this moment. Only two weeks before, Tenbrook had been shot out of his saddle when he had fortuitously interrupted a stick-up



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of the Drover's Bank in Manzanita. He knew that the masked rider who had hurled that slug was Hade Borka—and Borka knew that he knew it.

Standing there on the jail's top step Borka kept his shoulders perfectly still, his arms folded tightly across his thick chest. He said: "Right here's okay, Tenbrook. I rode in to tell yuh to turn Link Denver loose."

The sheriff weighed the outlaw with a long, cool judgment. Then he said, "If Tom Brant's arrested the kid, it's news to me. But that don't change anything, Borka. I ain't turn-in' Denver loose just because you ask me to."

"I ain't askin', I'm tellin'." Borka's voice bit through the silence like a file. "I like that boy—sort of promised his old man afore he died I'd look out for him."

"You're a damned liar!" snapped Tenbrook. "I know why yuh been sidin' Link Denver; it's because you've been usin' him as a look-out. He was with yuh on that job over in Manzanita two weeks ago! Remember?"

Borka's heavy, hooded eyelids came down. His arms dropped to his sides. "Jest you remember, Tenbrook," he said, "that I'm givin' yuh till tomorra mornin' to think up a reason for lettin' the kid go. Savvy?"

Spur chains jingled as the black-eyed outlaw stepped down to the dust and strode swiftly across the street to his waiting men. When they had gone, pounding out of town towards East Desert, the sheriff shook the tension out of his shoulders, climbed the steps to the door of his office. Slamming the door behind him, Tenbrook looked around the room, his bronzed forehead drawn by a troubled frown. A man stood over by the front window, a double-barreled shotgun cradled in the crook of his arm. "Dang it all, Tom," the sheriff said peevishly, "it's a pity yuh couldn't have told me you'd dabbed a loop on that Denver kid! Ain't I supposed to know anything around here?"

Moving slowly on short, saddle-bowed legs, Deputy Tom Brant deliberately went to the gun rack in the corner and hung up the shot gun. When he looked around, his reddish, round face was unstirred by any sign

of friendliness, his faded blue eyes coldly disapproving.

Ignoring the sheriff's question, he grunted, "Good thing I happened to hear yuh wind-jammin' with Borka out there. Otherwise—"

"Hell's Bells!" Tenbrook growled. "Can't yuh answer a civil question?"

"Mebbe." The deputy shrugged, then added, "But why in time should I go and bother yuh with business when you're supposed to be laid up in bed with a shot-up leg?"

"That don't make no difference. I gotta know what goes on here, ain't I?"

"Sure. But if I'd'a' told yuh about the kid, you'd have got outa bed right off and gone over to see Judge Od-lum. And you'd have either bribed or raw-hided him into lettin' the boy off scot free when he's a—"

"Don't stand there and tell me the judge has put that kid away!"

There was a smugly satisfied look on the deputy's red face. "He gave Denver two years in Kampasas this mornin'. I'm tellin' yuh, Jim, this younker's plumb bad medicine; he stole a Mule Shoe cayuse over in back of Sandyville two weeks ago—right after that ruckus of yours with Borka. Wouldn't surprise me none if the kid had been in that stick-up, either. The way it seemed to me when I grabbed him, things looked bad and he was scared enough to try linin' out for the border."

The sheriff started to speak, then changed his mind and limped across the office to where his battered old desk was propped against the smutched white wall. He sat down stiffly, favoring his wounded thigh, and commenced jerking open one desk drawer after another, banging each one back again while he shook his massive head in annoyance. Suddenly he swiveled abruptly in his chair. "What in time have yuh done to my desk?" he demanded irritably. "You've changed everything. Now I can't—"

THE SHORT-LIMBED deputy flared, "What's wrong with it? I just put your papers where yuh can find 'em without lookin' to hell-and-gone all over the place."

"Yuh sure fixed things, all right." Tenbrook's smoke-gray eyes were snapping. "I wish to hell you'd leave things alone around here, Tom. By grab. I'm the boss here in case you—"

"We gotta be more efficient, Jim," Brant put in placatively. "Roddin' the law in a county the size of Ogalalla is plumb important, only you don't seem to realize it."

"By grab," the sheriff shouted, "I realize one thing, and that's you're gonna save me on the prod with your blasted efficiency!"

Brant only shrugged. "Link Denver's commitment papers is right there on top of the desk under your nose, if that's what you're after."

Without a word the sheriff swung back to his desk. He thumbed quickly through the papers, then slapped both hands down hard on the arms of his chair. "Look'a'here, Tom," he cried angrily, "they ain't a thing in these papers to really prove Link stole that Mule Shoe cayuse. It says here—"

"Judge Odum musta thought so. He signed 'em, didn't he?"

"It ain't legal, Tom! I tell yuh a man can't be found guilty of a crime like hoss-stealin' without he gets a fair trial!"

A cold gleam came into the deputy's eyes. "I happen to know what's legal and what ain't. I looked up the kid's record just afore the hearin' this mornin'. He got a suspended sentence over to Acoma Wells six months back for runnin' a brand for Hade Borka. I suppose that don't prove he's a bad 'un!"

The sheriff impatiently shook his head. "By grab, I believe you'd lock up your own grandmother if she—"

"If she broke the law, sure." Brant's blunt jaw jutted out belligerently. "You're danged right I would."

"Now listen, Tom." Tenbrook put a hand pleadingly on his deputy's arm. "I know this here Denver Kid; knew his father afore the old man died, three years ago. The boy ain't really bad at heart. Why, he's been payin' his mother's way at the hospital over in Manzanita since winter. She's got T.B., they say—ain't much hope for her. Look, Tom." The sheriff leaned anxiously forward. "We can't go and send this lad to the state pen.

Why, it would just about kill his mother if she found it out."

"Judas Priest!" Brant threw up his stubby hands, a gesture of complete disgust. "There yuh go with your danged preachin' again!"

Brant, a former veterinary, had been Jim Tenbrook's chief deputy for five years of Oglalla County's turbulent history. But the deputy's sense of humor had been atrophied, his risibilities completely soured by those few years of observing the foibles and weaknesses of his fellow man. Tom's basically methodically nature, his unwaveringly serious outlook on affairs of the county, was responsible for the continual clashes that occurred between himself and the sheriff. For Jim Tenbrook lived in the firm conviction that common sense and a little human kindness would go farther toward making decent, law-abiding citizens than all the lockups in the land.

Brant, on the other hand, didn't believe in coddling—he believed that lawbreakers should be penalized to the fullest extent of the law. Hence, with increasing frequency, the little jail at Chuckaree rang with the violent yet friendly quarrels between sheriff and deputy.

Staring derisively down at the sheriff now, Tom Brant was saying: "Doggone it, Jim, I've allus said you'd make a better preacher than a lawman! But don't go and forget we ain't runnin' no tabernacle for savin' souls. We're runnin' a jail, by grab!" He paused, then added in a gentler tone, "Look, Jim, seein' as how yuh just got outa bed, mebbe yuh better leave me take the kid over to Kampasas tonight. His sentence don't begin till tomorra noon, but with Hade Borka and his bunch hangin' around—"

Tenbrook pushed to his feet. "If anybody's gonna take the kid, it'll be me, dang it! I got to see Marshal Peters at State Line anyways, and— He broke off short, the expression in his eyes darkening. "I wish you'd let me know about Link sooner. Now it's too late to do anything. I—"

"The law's gotta be upheld."

"Blast the law!" shouted the sheriff. Then, dully: "I'm goin' home to eat. By the time I get back the kid'll have had his own supper and we can start,

Tell Yerdon to feed him good—a big steak or—”

“Denver won’t eat no supper,” Brant said savagely. “Wouldn’t eat all day yest’dy neither. Yerdon couldn’t get a bit of chuck into that ornery younker. By thunder, the pen’ll take some of the meanness outa his dratted hide. He’s the sassiest, goll-durnedest—”

“Well, he’s gotta eat,” Tenbrook insisted. “I ain’t luggin’ a starvin’ man no twenty mile tonight.” The crow-track wrinkles around his eyes squeezed white. “I got it, Tom. I’ll just get Serena to feed him. That’ll fix everything.”

The deputy’s suddenly expelled breath blasted the stillness. “Have yuh gone loco altogether?” he gasped at last. “Good gosh, now won’t that look nice—the Sheriff of Ogalalla County feedin’ a prisoner in his own home!”

“Serena won’t mind. She’s gonna have bread puddin’ for supper, and if there’s one thing Serena can cook it’s bread puddin’ with larrup. Tell Yerdon to bring the kid in here. Pronto!”

THE DEPUTY shrugged, went across the room to the gray metal door that opened on the cell block. He yelled down the corridor, “Hey, Yerdon, bring the prisoner in here. The sheriff’s takin’ him now.” Then he came back and tossed a pair of handcuffs on the desk for the sheriff. He said, “I forgot to tell yuh Waymark, the Tonopah Mine super was here an hour ago—wants us to put somebuddy out at the diggin’s tonight too sort of keep an eye on their payroll.”

Tenbrook frowned. “Payroll?”

“The stage was three hours late—didn’t get to the mine till the crew had fogged for home.”

“Ain’t they got a watchman over there?”

“Sure they have. But he’s new, and the mine people are afraid he may be hooked up with Hade Borka. Somebuddy tipped ’em off to it.”

The sheriff morosely shook his head. “It’s throwin’ temptation right in front of folks to leave a three thousand dollar payroll in a place like that over night.”

The door to the cell block clanged against the wall, and Sime Yerdon,

the grizzled keeper, poked his white head in. He said, “Here he is, sheriff,” and shoved the prisoner into the room.

Tenbrook’s gaze went past Brant and stopped on the bronzed face of a boy of sixteen or seventeen—certainly not twenty, as the commitment papers had stated. Link Denver had sullen black eyes, that held a definite defiance; there was a dogged, tough look about the thin line of the kid’s mouth, and that expression seemed to the sheriff unnatural and a little put on. The kid leaned his shoulders against the dobe wall, staring indifferently around him. He was tall, too, although the way he slouched made him look shorter than he was.

Tenbrook said, “Hello, Link. How are yuh?”

A surly flicker showed in the kid’s eyes. “What’s it to you?” he demanded thinly.

“He needs a danged good hidin’!” growled Tom. “That’s what’d take some of the meanness out of him.”

Tenbrook said quietly, “I’ll handle this, Tom.” Then, to the boy, “We’re havin’ supper over to my house, Link.”

“Thanks,” the kid said curtly. “I ain’t hungry.”

“There, I just said yuh wouldn’t get no supper into him, Jim!” The deputy was staring angrily at the boy. “He’s too blamed ornery to live!”

“He’ll feel different,” the sheriff said mildly, “time he sees what Serena’s got to eat.” He grinned at the kid. “There ain’t nobody livin’ won’t eat Serena’s cookin’. Wait and see.”

The kid’s eye narrowed; he bit down hard on his trembling underlip. “I ain’t eatin’ nothin’, I tellyuh.”

“Well, anyways,” the sheriff said genially, “come on out for the ride. That’ll do yuh good just ridin’ behind that team of mine.”

The deputy put in, “You want I should take care of the Tonopah people? I ain’t got a thing on anyway tonight. I can sleep at the mine office as good as anywheres else.”

“Reckon yuh better do it.” Tenbrook nodded to the kid. “Come on, son. Let’s go.”

Out in front of the jail, Tenbrook waited for the boy to climb up to the faded green cushions of the pole buggy, then went around and got in him-

self, on the other side. Brant followed, resting a freckled hand on the iron seat rail. He said, "You forgot the irons," and tossed the handcuffs up. "And here's your gun." He reached over and chocked the Colt into the sheriff's empty holster. "Look, Jim"—he eyed Tenbrook coldly—"I allus believe in lettin' a man kill his own snakes, but if I was you, I'd put the handcuffs on the kid. Yuh can't be sure he won't make a break for it, if he gets the chance. And there's Borka—"

Link Denver stiffened straight in the seat. "Borka?" A sudden tightness showed through the kid's tone. "Has Hade been down here lookin' for me?"

The deputy ignored the boy's agitation. "Jim, yuh better do like I tell yuh. Yuh can't tell—"

Tenbrook had unwrapped the reins from the whip socket. Before Brant could finish his admonition, he flipped up the ribbons and called peevishly, "Giddap!" The blacks yanked the buggy out into the middle of the dusty street, leaving the deputy standing there with his mouth hanging open.

During the mile ride to his house on Rainbow Creek, Tenbrook ignored the boy who sat slumped in the seat at his side. He was busy with his thoughts anyway—thoughts of the disagreeable job he had to do tonight, thoughts of his deputy's ornery ways. Tom had a good head on his shoulders, only he ought to be in the Army where there was no room for sentiment or ordinary human kindness. Yes, the Army was the place for Tom Brant; he'd make a fine topkick.

When they reached the little clapboard house with its vine-covered veranda and neatly tended front yard, the sheriff got down and tied the blacks to the picket fence. "Come on, Link." He grinned up at the sullen-eyed boy. "You'll feel better time you've had your—"

"Now listen," the kid burst out angrily, "I already told yuh—"

"All right, son, all right." The kid didn't make a move until Tenbrook went up and sort of hitched him down from the seat.

THEY WENT in the house, the boy making a big show of indifference,

as though he thought it was nothing out of the way for a sentenced criminal to walk into the home of the Sheriff of Ogalalla County.

In the little living room with its flowered wall paper, he slumped down in a wingback chair by the front window, sprawling with his chin sunk on his chest. The sheriff leaned his shoulder against the stone and quartz fireplace and looked down at the boy, his gray eyes crinkling humorously. "Do yuh smell what I smell, son? By grab, I'm sure hungry!" When the kid just shrugged his thin shoulders, he lifted his voice toward the kitchen from whence issued sounds of clinking china and rattling tinware. "Hey, Serena, come in a minute. I got company for supper."

The heavy portieres parted suddenly, and a plump, middle-aged woman bustled breathlessly into the room. A quick smile played at the corners of her generous mouth, and that smile was reflected in eyes that were a clear, unclouded blue. "Well, my land!" Her capable hands, dappled with flour, went instinctively to the strands of silver-gray that lay damply against her smooth forehead. "If I'd a knowed you was bringin' company, Jim, I'd a—well, bless me, it's Link Denver! Land sakes—"

"Whoa there, Ma." Laughing good-naturedly. Tenbrook went over and gave his wife a tender squeeze. "Yuh better be savin' some of that wind for waitin' on a couple of hungry—I mean, I'm hungry as a chaw-eared wildcat!" He answered Serena Tenbrook's quick, questioning glance with a sad shake of the head, after making sure the boy wasn't watching them.

A look of understanding and compassion came into the woman's eyes, like a shadow passing swiftly over water. And somehow the kid seemed to sense the sympathy that reached out to him from those blue eyes, for he pulled his own eyes up from his dusty boots long enough to flick her a quick glance, then went back to staring at the floor.

"My goodness," Serena said gently, "how you have growed, Link Denver! I declare, you wasn't more'n just a little shaver in knee britches when I seen you last. Well, anyways, I'm

mighty glad Jim brought you to supper—but I *do* hope you're partial to veal pie and—"

"Bread puddin' with larrup!" Tenbrook smacked his lips anticipatorily. "Link, yuh ain't never tasted nothin' like Ma's special bread puddin'!"

Link Denver didn't answer. He just stayed the way he was, all hunkered down in the wingback chair. Then suddenly he reached up and jerked off his hat, commenced to run his long brown fingers around the ragged brim. After a bit he whispered, "I ain't hungry."

"Oh dear," murmured Serena crestfallenly, "maybe Link don't like veal pie!" The eyes, seeking her husband's face, were troubled.

The boy's gaze carried quickly to Serena Tenbrook. "Sure I do, ma'am, only I don't—" He broke off, running the tip of his tongue over his dry lips.

There were hot raised biscuits, fresh out of the oven, and a steaming veal pie served in an ironstone china bowl. Link Denver reluctantly sat down opposite the sheriff, but he held his eyes stubbornly on the checkered table cloth in front of him. "I ain't hungry," he got out in a choked voice.

When Serena went to the kitchen for the coffee, the sheriff leaned towards the boy, talking behind his hand so his wife wouldn't hear him. "Look, son, just take a few bites now and then, so Ma won't feel bad. If there's anything upsets her it's folks not eatin' her cookin'."

Serena bustled in with the coffee then, and Tenbrook said, "Listen, Ma, you wanta drive over with us to spend the night with Missus Beeson? Me and Link have gotta go that way past the Tonopah diggins, anyways, and I'd feel better seein's how I won't get back till tomorra mornin'."

"Well, I suppose so," considered Serena. "Not that I mind stayin' here alone, though. Land sakes, I'm used to that, bein' married to a lawman for forty years."

The sheriff ate two helpings of veal pie and didn't once look at the kid, pretended not to notice it when Link at last began to eat. The kid started tentatively at first, then suddenly began to wolf the food, looking up now and then in half shamed awareness

of the others. He ate six biscuits and a half a jar of blackberry jam and two plates of veal pie before he finally pushed back from the table with a sigh that seemed to start down in his boots. Now, for the first, he lifted his eyes to Serena's face in a direct glance. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words choked to a stop, and he looked quickly away again.

Serena reached out a plump hand and patted the thin one of the boy's. "Jim and me," she said softly, "we used to have a son like you, Link, only he—" Her voice, too, caught suddenly, and she stood abruptly. "I'll go get the dessert now." She bustled into the kitchen.

WHEN SHE returned to the dining room, the kid had left the table and was standing over by the window, holding the curtains open. There was a tenseness in his lean shoulders and when he spoke his voice was thin and remote. "Listen, sheriff, I'm tellin' yuh not let her ride with us. When Hade finds out you're takin' me over to the pen tonight, there won't be nothin' stop him. I know that hombre; a little thing like a woman won't hinder him when he once unlimbers his iron."

Serena said, "My gracious, Link, there ain't no call you should worry about me. Now you march right back here and eat your puddin' before it gets cold. And tell me about your mother; Martha and me used to be right friendly when we lived in Sandyville."

The kid turned and came slowly back to the table. "The doc says she won't live a year." The words were low and bitter as he stared down at his knuckle-whitened hands. "And now—now I ain't gonna be able to—"

The sheriff finished off his plate with a piece of biscuit and went to work on the pudding. And he was thinking how hard it was for a boy to be heading for the pen, no matter for how long or for what he'd done. And it was hardest, too, when a boy had a sick mother to worry about like Link had. Tenbrook was wondering about the kid's warning, wondering if maybe he wasn't being foolish after all, letting Serena ride along with

them, even though they were taking the back trail past the Tonopah diggings. Hade Borka *might* just possibly learn some way that he was taking the kid. And if he did...

When Serena went upstairs to change, Tenbrook smoked his usual after-supper cigar, but somehow the weed was flat and savorless, and after a couple of puffs he threw it into the fireplace. Looking now at the kid he could see that Link was getting more nervous by the minute, and some of that feeling communicated itself to him, so that when he heard hoofs coming up the trail from town, he drew his gun and went quickly to the window. But he blew out a long breath of relief as he recognized Tom Brant on his paint pony, traveling north towards the Tonopah Mine. The deputy threw one quick glance at the team out in front before he swept on into the dusty twilight.

The sheriff came back from the window and said, "All right, son, it's seven o'clock. I guess we oughta be startin'." As they went through the front hallway, he called upstairs, "We'll be waitin' out in the rig, Ma. Make it pronto."

Five minutes later Serena Tenbrook came down the front walk, togged out in a tight-bodied dimity that made her look slimmer than she really was. "My land," she said breathlessly, "I hadn't ought to go galavantin' with you two with all I got to do at home."

The sheriff helped her up to the seat between the kid and himself, and picked up the reins. Suddenly Link Denver rapped out, "Yuh better put the irons on me like your deputy said. Because if yuh don't I'm gonna make a break for it if I get the chance!"

Tenbrook's lips were suddenly long and thin. He got out the handcuffs and grimly snapped one ring on the kid's right wrist, the other to the iron seat rail at his side. "Maybe it's better that way. I sure don't wanta have to shoot yuh in the back, kid."

They drove the first three miles in silence, the boy slumped down low in the seat, his thin face covered by the turned-up collar of his ragged coat, his somber eyes gazing steadily out over the bobbing heads of the team. As they slanted down from the low

ridge of the Rattlesnake Hills, darkness began to fall, the horizon fading and closing in on them like a palpable thing. The mauve tints of twilight became purple, and presently a full moon tipped its silver disc above the snow-crowned peaks ahead of them.

They were wheeling swiftly along in the shadow of the high quartz cliff that rimmed Tonopah Valley when the sheriff abruptly stiffened, hauling in on the reins so suddenly that the hoofs of the blacks struck fire from the stony trail. At the same instant, a paint horse, riderless and with stirrups flailing, loped towards them out of the gloom.

Tenbrook cried, "By grab, that's Tom Brant's mount!" and sprang out of the buggy just in time to grab the runaway's bridle as it shied off the trail. Swiftly, he made the horse fast to the tail ring of the buggy, and came around and swung up to the seat beside his wife, whipping the blacks into a stretching run.

Serena laid a tense hand on her husband's arm. "Good grief, Jim," she cried alarmedly, "you don't think Tom's been hurt?"

Tenbrook made no reply, but sat rigidly gripping the ribbons as the pole buggy slewed around a bend in the trail and rolled up in front of a high, white-painted gate. The gate was open, he saw, and in the clearing beyond loomed the buildings of the Tonopah Borax Mine. To the right of the entrance was a lean-to used by the mine people as a tool house, and a hundred feet from the gate, in the center of the clearing, stood the big storage hopper, its planked siding limned blackly against the rising moon. A little to the left of the hopper squatted the two-room shack that was the mine office.

THERE WERE no lights showing in the shack's two front windows, but staring intently into the shadows that clotted the yard, Tenbrook dimly made out the shapes of four saddle horses beneath a nearby Chino tree. Tenbrook edged the team quietly through the gate, pulling up beside the tool house. As he climbed down and went quickly around the buggy, Serena whispered, "Jim, you got to

promise you'll be careful. *Please!*"

"Don't worry, Ma. Just set quiet." The sheriff reconnoitered along the rim of the clearing, promptly came back to the buggy. "It don't look so good for Tom," he said troubledly. "One of them mounts back there belongs to Hade Borka!"

Hunched forward in the seat, Link Denver gave a low, mocking laugh, although when he spoke, his voice betrayed the sudden tension that gripped him. "Do we get out here, sheriff?"

Tenbrook hesitated. Looking calmly up at the kid, he was thinking that maybe Tom Brant had been right about this efficiency thing. A man couldn't go on being lucky all the time. Sooner or later, he'd have to start being business-like and begin figuring things out ahead.

Serena's voice lifted: "Jim, you can't go in there alone. Suppose they're layin' for you."

"Listen, Ma." Tenbrook's tone was grim. "You'll be helpin' me if you just stay right here and keep your lip buttoned. I got to go in there. They've likely got Tom trussed up—and there's a payroll to be thought of."

Link Denver put in quickly, "You're gonna leave me here, I expect. But what if I should start hollerin'—what's gonna happen then?"

Tenbrook considered that possibility. It was a problem—the whole proposition. He couldn't walk a prisoner up to that darkened shack and expect to grab himself three or four outlaws without risking the lives of his deputy and Serena Tenbrook's husband to boot. "Get down, son." Abruptly, he reached up and unlocked the iron that clamped the boy's wrist to the seat rail. "Make it quick, now!"

"Okay, okay." Link Denver hopped down beside the sheriff, thrust out both wrists for the handcuffs.

But the sheriff didn't snap them on again. Instead he tossed them up to the seat beside his wife. "I can't leave yuh with them things on," he said gruffly. "One of them bushwhackers might get back here and start shootin' without askin' any questions. And anyways, you gotta look after Ma."

"You mean yuh ain't gonna—"

"Oh, shut up, can't yuh?" The sheriff wheeled without another word, began running towards the shack, taking advantage of every clump of brush, each pool of shadow. He cut around to the rear of the shack, his mind coldly calculating his chances of grabbing Borka and his men red-handed. And he was doing some fast thinking—not about the peril of the moment—but, ironically, about what Tom Brant was going to say after this was over. He could almost hear the red-faced deputy's sarcastic voice now, telling him how it was too blamed bad the Sheriff of Ogalalla County had to go and lose a prisoner who wasn't hardly more than a boy!

Turning the corner of the shack, Tenbrook slowed to a walk. The silence was so profound that he was conscious of the racket of his own boots scuffing against the packed earth. The rear door of the shack suddenly loomed in front of him and common sense pulled him aside as he came against it. Abruptly, he caught the low, filing hum of men's voices beyond the plank partition. He stood fast in the wall's shadow, thinking quickly and strongly. There was only one thing to do and that was to toll Hade Borka and his men out of the office, into the open.

Keeping his shoulders flattened against the wall, he reached out cautiously, found the knob of the door. Then he kicked the door open with the heel of his right boot and simultaneously drew his gun. He yelled, "All right, Borka!" and brought up the double-action Colt, earing back the hammer as it arced above his head.

As his cry beat against the stillness, the buzz of voices inside the shack faded into the roar of aroused gunfire. Standing there tensely with his back pressed against the wall, he saw muzzle flame leap towards the open door, flashing and fading and flashing again. Bullets screamed past him in the night.

Tenbrook stepped backward, put his right shoulder against the building and leaned there, his heart pounding like a drum in his ears. Half sheltered here, he waited for the outlaws to come pouring through the rear door. They never did. Instead, he heard

boots in the shack, kicking through it at a dead run. Tenbrook whirled, ducked along the wall and came out in the open, near the front of the building.

Directly ahead loomed the storage hopper, its timbered sides silver-gray in the moonlight. He started toward it, brought up short, the newly healed wound in his thigh stabbing him with fresh agony. And that was the moment the front door of the shack slammed loudly behind him.

TENBROOK whipped around. A dozen yards away, his short, stubby legs seeming to take root in the dust, Hade Borka stood, a six-gun clamped in a rock-like fist.

Borka snarled, "Well, if it ain't the sheriff!"

And Borka's fingers, blunt as quirt-ends, were flexing now on the butt of his gun. In that split-second of indecision, Tenbrook realized that there was not a mortal chance of escaping the outlaw's first shot. For in those hooked fingers there was lodged an inhuman speed which he was sure he could not match. In a flash of cold reasoning he knew there was but one thing to do, and that was to whip up his own gun, but without any attempt at a lightning shot—he must take no chance of sending his bullet wrong. He must shoot straight into that thick body....

Hade Borka's hand convulsed—the knotted fingers jerked. There was only the swift glint of moonlight on steel, then the roaring explosion and a hammer stroke against the sheriff's shoulder, yanking him around. The impact of the slug pulled him sideways, but failed to stagger his prepared and stiffened body. His own gun, held hip-high, bloomed a long, sullen red flash across the dark. The flat echo of the two shots rocketed out across the silence and Hade Borka teetered on his heels, then seemed to grow rigid. Suddenly his knees buckled and he faded down against the dust like a sack of old rags. And other things were happening with kaleidoscopic swiftness.

Beyond the motionless form of Hade Borka, two other outlaws suddenly stepped from the thick shadows

in front of the shack. With guns lined down on the sheriff, they moved quickly into a pool of moonlight a dozen yards away, and stopped. Bracing himself against the inevitable smash of lead, Tenbrook stiffened, his trigger finger tightening....

And that was the moment that a voice in back of him cracked out, "Not this time, boys!"

Tenbrook whipped a glance in the direction of that voice and saw why Borka's men had not fired. Link Denver was standing right behind him, and the kid had a Winchester jammed against his shoulder, its long black barrel pointing rigidly at the two outlaws. The kid repeated in a clipped, staccato tone, "Don't try anything, boys! Just drop those guns pronto!"

The tension slowly drained out of the sheriff as he drew a long breath of relief. He gave the kid a wry, hard grin. "Well, damn my hide, Link, yuh sure fool a man! Where in hell did you blow from?"

The boy's voice shook a little: "Go ahead and say it, dang yuh! I know I'm a loco fool for not lightin' a shuck! But when I found the rifle in your deputy's saddle boot, I—"

"You're all right, kid. Don't try to make no speech about it!" Tenbrook whipped his glance back to the front door of the shack. That door had swung open silently, and the chunky form of Tom Brant was staggering out into the moonlight. The deputy rubbed a shaking hand over his forehead, started to open his mouth, then spotted the two outlaws, saw Tenbrook and the kid standing there in front of him.

"By grab!" he said thickly. "By grab—"

Weaving unsteadily on his short, bowed legs, he went over to Borka's men, snapped his handcuffs on their reluctantly extended wrists. Then he turned. "Well," he said, a trace of triumph in his husky voice, "we got 'em, by thunder! Shows what efficiency'll do along with a little luck!"

"We got 'em!" Tenbrook's voice lifted angrily. "What do yuh mean we got 'em? Why, if it hadn't been for the kid here, you and me'd be howlin' for our lives like a pair of cow-kicked

dogs right now. We got 'em! Gosh!"

"Well," the deputy began sheepishly, "could I help it if I walked spang into Borka's trap? They was waitin' for me, damn it!"

Tenbrook stared witheringly at Brant. "Tom, if yuh wasn't banged up enough already, by gosh, I'd take a good poke at yuh. You and your blasted efficiency!"

Brant looked embarrassed. "Hell," he said faintly, "mebbe I have been hard on the kid. He could'a tuck-tailed it while the fireworks was poppin'."

Link Denver gave a brittle laugh. "Stow the damned chin music, you two hombres! I ain't afraid to take my medicine no more!"

Tenbrook whirled on the kid. "Kampasas ain't the answer to everythin', dang it! You keep outa this!"

BRANT GOT out a bandanna and daubed at the cut over his right eye. He said, "Listen, Jim, mebbe we can get Judge Odlum to knock a year off Denver's time. Mebbe you could

see him tonight about it."

Tenbrook snorted. "You bet your boots I'll see him tonight. And it won't be to get no year took off the kid's time, neither. It'll be to get Link paroled in my custody, by golly! He ain't gonna see the inside of a lock-up after tonight if I can help it! I—"

The words died in the sheriff's throat, for at that instant a thin, muffled cry lifted from somewhere near the mine gate. Brant said, "What in blazes was that?"

Link Denver was staring half fearfully at the sheriff. He gave a low, awkward laugh. "That's your missus, sheriff," he said hesitantly. "Yuh told me to take care of her, didn't yuh? Well, I—I locked her up in that tool house down by the gate!"

"Well, I'll be damned!" Jim Tenbrook stared admiringly at the embarrassed boy. "Son," he said solemnly, "yuh sure don't know Serena like I do! By grab, afore she's through with yuh for pullin' that one onto her, you'll wish yuh was locked up safe and sound yourself!" ● END

SHEEP DIP ELECTS A SHERIFF

"He's all right," said Cherrie. "He was around here just a little while ago. I guess all this excitement has scared him away."

A shout came from a searcher near the corral. "Here it is, sheriff! All busted to pieces!"

And there were the pieces of the ballot box. But no ballots.

"Now that is funny," said the sheriff. "Mighty funny!"

There was only one thing to do, it was decided. All the ballots were declared mutilated. And Hank Shepard became the new sheriff.

Watt was the first to congratulate him. "Shepard," he said, in huge relief, "I'm tickled plumb to death!"

The sheepman took the cowman's extended hand. "Watt," he said, "you make me ashamed of myself. I'm goin' to see that every cowman in this county gets a square deal from my office. And I'll do all I can to end this foolish squabble."

"Me, too," said Watt, and warmly shook his hand.

"This is the only election I ever saw," said the sheriff, "that wound

(cont'd from page 87)

up with everybody bein' satisfied. I predict better, more peaceful times ahead for Bell county. Lord knows, there's been enough trouble in the last twenty years. And now, I reckon we'd better be gettin' back."

After the crowd had gone, Watt and Balkhide backed up against the corral fence, hooked their boot heels over the lower rail, and rolled cigarettes. Silently, they smoked.

"Ba-a-a!"

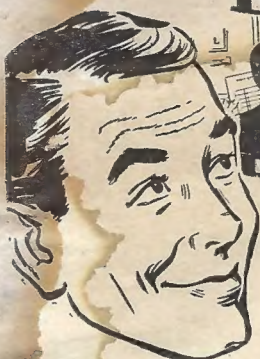
Watt extended his huge lower lip and sucked smoke up his nose, partially destroying a familiar odor that assailed his nostrils.

"Oh, Rell! Tony's sick again!"

Cherrie emerged from the arbor, followed by Rell. Tony, making for the trough, encountered Watt.

"Hm-m-m," mused Watt, surveying the remnants of the ballot box. "He must of et somethin' that didn't agree with him."

He stopped and tenderly stroked the suffering goat. Tony looked up in doleful amazement and uttered a tremulous "Ba-a-a!" ● END



Picture yourself going places

You've done it often. Call it day-dreaming if you like, but you've seen yourself in a bigger job—giving orders and making decisions—driving off in a smart new car—buying your family a fine home.

There's nothing wrong with dreams. But how about making them come true? *You can do it*, if you're willing to try!

Look around you. The men who are going places are the *trained* men. They've learned

special skills that bring them better jobs and higher pay. It's the men *without* training whose dreams never come true.

What are you going to do about it? Just wait and wish? If you really *want* to succeed, you can get the training you need by studying at home in your spare time. International Correspondence Schools offer you a course in just about any field you choose, giving you the practical plus the bedrock facts and theory. No skimming or skipping! And you'll be earning while you learn. Students report better jobs and more pay within a few months.

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- ☐ Painting Contractor
- ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Reading Arch. Blueprints

ART

- ☐ Cartooning
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- ☐ Fashion Illustrating
- ☐ Magazine Illustrating
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- ☐ Sketching and Painting

AUTOMOTIVE

- ☐ Auto Body Rebuilding
- ☐ Auto Elec. Technician
- ☐ Auto-Engine Tune Up
- ☐ Automobile

AVIATION

- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft & Engine Mechanic

BUSINESS

- ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Bookkeeping and Accounting
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- ☐ Public Accounting
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- ☐ Office Management
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- ☐ Analytical Chemistry
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemist Lab. Technician
- ☐ General Chemistry
- ☐ Natural Gas Prod. & Trans.
- ☐ Petroleum Engineering
- ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

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- ☐ Construction Engineering
- ☐ Highway Engineering
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- ☐ Surveying and Mapping
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